OCT. '42

UNKNOWN Worlds

25c OCT · 1942

FANTASY FICTION

THE UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG

By John Riverside

Jonathan Hoag didn't know what his business was—for a total amnesia took hold every morning to leave him, in the evening, with no knowledge of what he had done. But there was something under his fingernails, something—that suggested he hire a detective!

THE NEW ONE . . . . . By Fredric Brown

Baal, the ancient god of fire, was his master. Baal—patient Baal—waiting till the pyromaniac would be maneuvered into a position where his work could do the most damage, could destroy thousands of lives, an ammunition depot— Only another, stronger demigod could stop that plan—

MAGICIAN'S DINNER . . . . . By Jane Rice

She married a magician—the professional kind who has highly developed fingers that prove conclusively the eye is either a liar, or slow on the uptake. She wasn't a magician herself. Further, she wasn't a cook. And she had a dinner to prepare. The cook she got— Magicians don't know much!

COMPLIMENTS OF THE AUTHOR

By Henry Kuttner

The book had fifty answers—answers to every problem that could come up in life. And he had the Book, always handy to tell him the only answer to gain safety. True enough for forty-nine of the answers—but it was a very tricky Book!

OCT. 1942 UNKNOWN WORLDS FANTASY FICTION

HELEN WAS FOOLED . . . she blamed her itching, irritated scalp on the sun, but cutting out sun-baths didn't help. Then she learned about the infectious type of dandruff and how to treat it with Listerine and massage. Before long she was delighted to find those annoying symptoms beginning to disappear.

AND SO WAS BOB . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."

AND SO WAS MRS. K . . . she had blamed the itching and irritation on reducing and changed her diet. Then an advertisement suggested that the condition might be the infectious type of dandruff. "It's simply wonderful," she says, "how Listerine Antiseptic and massage helped me."

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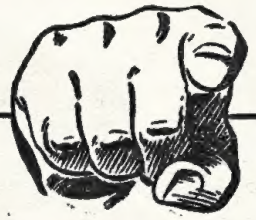

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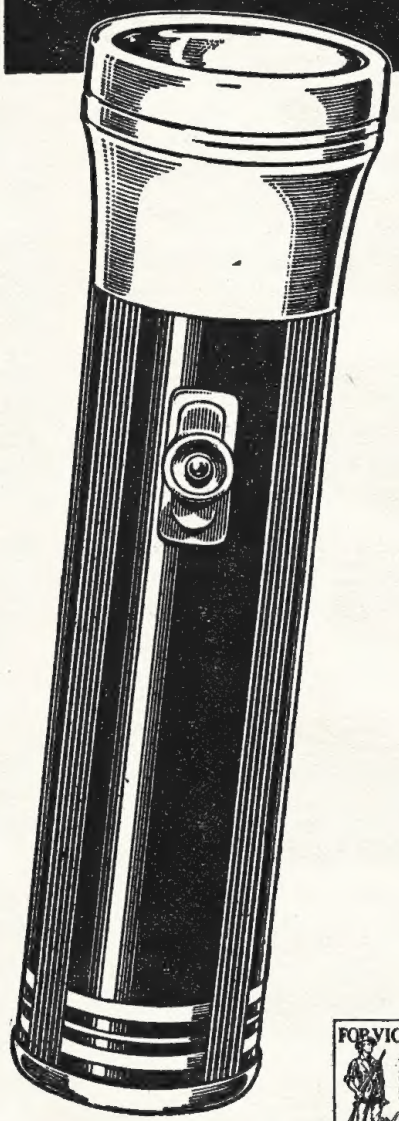

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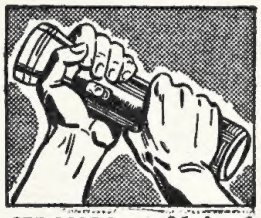

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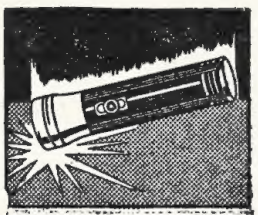

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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The readers speak their minds.

Illustrations by: M. Isip, Kolliker, Kramer, Orban and Smith

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OF THINGS BEYOND

Our science of today has stamped itself upon the entire structure of our lives, our thoughts, even unto the superstition and subconscious thoughts below the reasoning level. It's molded the world in its own way; it's practical and it works—works every time it is applied according to known, published laws and formulas. The essence of the thing is embodied in patent laws that require that the material, to be patented, must be explained in such a way that any "expert in the art" can duplicate it. An electric motor *always* works, if the current is supplied, for anyone, whether expert in the art or a two-year-old who stumbles against the switch. Science is wonderful; it works every time for anybody.

The "science" of two—three—six thousand years ago was very different. It didn't work for everybody, and half the time it didn't work for anybody, expert in the art or not. When it worked, it was decidedly wonderful; when it failed, it was—well, nothing worked all the time, anyway, did it? Not then, in that day, certainly—and until physical science supplied things that did work every time, that was the best there was to be had.

It was well along into the eighteenth century before the first of the nonsciences of the old days was hauled forth from the shadows, brushed off and looked over carefully. It displayed the characteristics of the nonphysical science—it won't work for everybody. It won't work for anybody, even the experts, every time. It has possibilities that vary from individual to individual without reasons that can be measured with balance, rule, or voltmeter. It's highly unpredictable. The man who dragged it out into the light got the wrong idea of what it was he had, so Mesmer and his work alike were damned by the traditionalists.

Hypnotism is a typical nonphysical science—a science of the mind, of intangibles that can't be measured and weighed and metered by any yardstick or instrument known to man. Its methods smell—stink, in the nostrils of the traditionalists—of flubdubbery, hocus-pocus and associated unrealities. It *is* an *un*reality—in the sense of an immaterial. Further maddening the traditionalists is the fact that its laws aren't laws, mere general rules-o'-thumb. Low-grade intelligences cannot be hypnotized—it takes a powerful mind to be really subject to a hypnotist. Then the results obtainable are dependent on the individual subject and his relationship to the hypnotist. If the subject thinks the hypnotist is a stuffed shirt—the hypnotist is, for that subject's treatment, about as effective as a well-starched and stuffed shirt would be. But the hypnotist can't tell what a subject thinks of him—it isn't good manners to tell a man what your opinion of him is—and the hypnotist finds the general rules of hypnotism don't work.

The immaterial sciences must constantly battle that great handicap; they must work with individual human beings, whose talents and powers vary unpredictably, and in ways no devices of man can yet measure. Hypnotism is the simplest, lowest form of the immaterial sciences—and that even is in a borderline region, unused in any more than a tiny fringe of its possibilities. (Definitely, hypnotism is a complete answer to the problem of dental anæthesia for normal people—eighty percent of the time, that is. No immaterial science ever works every time.

Beyond that simplest of the immaterials there lies, beyond the slightest shadow of doubt, an immense field of other and more important immaterial sciences. What they are, what possibilities they hold—we can't more than guess. Science that yields definite, provable, weighable and measurable results every time a rigidly determinable procedure is carried out yields more immediate return, so there is no real work being done yet in the science of immaterials.

But there are hints—hints both from ancient days, when the immaterial sciences enjoyed better standing because the material sciences were then as hit-or-miss as they, and hints from the freak occurrences of modern times.

Telepathy exists. There are too many of those accidental, freak occurrences, plus the studied, mathematical evidence of scientific experimenters, to make it possible to doubt. Meteor falls were reported for centuries before science would admit that meteors existed, and did fall. No one who saw a meteor fall could point to a falling meteor and say, "There, that is what I saw." But when tens of hundreds of reports come in—something real lies behind them.

Clairvoyance exists—and has been reported too frequently for doubt.

It seems fairly probable that levitation is possible. What gravity is, we don't know—only that an indefinable, but tangible and measurable something pulls us downward. There have been a considerable number of reported, detailed instances of controlled levitation, of men who lifted and floated in air, or lifted weights without material means.

Prevision and prophecy has been reported, and checked, a goodly number of times. Some men can, somehow, not controllably and at will, however, see the future.

What other powers lie among the immaterial sciences—no one is even trying very hard to find out!

The Editor.

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THE UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG

By John Riverside

● **Whatever it was—not even Jonathan Hoag could remember at night after the day's work. But investigating it, to find just what the strange brownish-red matter Hoag found under his fingernails was, proved a task so dangerous that "deadly" was an inadequate description—the Sons of the Bird punished with more than death!**

Illustrated by Kramer

—the end it is not good.
From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never,
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.
—Swinburne.

"Is it blood, doctor?" Jonathan Hoag moistened his lips with his tongue and leaned forward in the chair, trying to see what was written on the slip of paper the medico held.

Dr. Potbury brought the slip of paper closer to his vest and looked at Hoag over his spectacles. "Any particular reason," he asked, "why you should find blood under your fingernails?"

"No. That is to say— Well, no—there isn't. But it *is* blood—isn't it?"

"No," Potbury said heavily. "No, it isn't blood."

Hoag knew that he should have felt relieved. But he was not. He knew in that moment that he had clung to the notion that the brown grime under his fingernails was dry blood rather than let himself dwell on other, less tolerable, ideas.

He felt sick at his stomach. But he had to know—

"What is it, doctor? Tell me."

Potbury looked him up and down. "You asked me a specific question. I've answered it. You did not ask me what the substance was; you asked me to find out whether or not it was blood. It is not."

"But— You are playing with me. Show me the analysis." Hoag half rose from his chair and reached for the slip of paper.

The doctor held it away from him, then tore it carefully in two. Placing the two pieces together he tore them again, and again.

"Why, you!"

"Take your practice elsewhere," Potbury answered. "Never mind the fee. Get out. And don't come back."

Hoag found himself on the street, walking toward the elevated station. He was still much shaken by the doctor's rudeness. He was afraid of rudeness as some persons are of snakes, or great heights, or small rooms. Bad manners, even when not directed at him personally but simply displayed to others in his presence, left him sick and helpless and overcome with shame.

If he himself were the butt of boorishness he had no defense save flight.

He set one foot on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to the elevated station and hesitated. A trip by elevated was a trying thing at best, what with the pushing and the jostling and the grimy dirt and the ever-present chance of uncouth behavior; he knew that he was not up to it at the moment. If he had to listen to the cars screaming around the curve as they turned north toward the Loop, he suspected that he would scream, too.

He turned away suddenly and was forced to check himself abruptly, for he was chest to chest with a man who himself was entering the stairway. He shied away. "Watch your step, buddy," the man said, and brushed on past him.

"Sorry," Hoag muttered, but the man was already on by.

The man's tone had been brisk rather than unkind; the incident should not have troubled Hoag, but it did. The man's dress and appearance, his very odor, upset Hoag. Hoag knew that there was no harm in well-worn dungarees and leather Windbreaker, no lack of virtue in a face made a trifle greasy by sweat dried in place in the course of labor. Pinned to the bill of the man's cap was an oval badge, with a serial number and some lettering. Hoag guessed that he was a truck driver, a mechanic, a rigger, any one of the competent, muscular crafts which keep the wheels turning over. Probably a family man as well, a fond father and a good provider, whose greatest lapse from virtue might be an extra glass of beer and a tendency to up it a nickel on two pair.

It was sheer childishness for Hoag to permit himself to be put off by such appearance and to prefer a white shirt, a decent topcoat, and gloves. Yet if the man had smelled of shaving lotion rather than sweat the encounter would not have been distasteful.

He told himself so and told himself that he was silly and weak. Still—could such a coarse and brutal face really be the outward mark of warmth and sensitivity? That shapeless blob of nose, those piggish eyes?

Never mind, he would go home in a taxi, not looking at anyone. There was a stand just ahead, in front of the delicatessen.

"Where to?" The door of the cab was open; the hackman's voice was impersonally insistent.

Hoag caught his eye, hesitated and changed his mind. That brutishness again—eyes with no depth to them and a skin marred by blackheads and enlarged pores.

"Unnh . . . excuse me. I forgot something." He turned away quickly and stopped abruptly, as something caught him around the waist. It was a small boy on skates who had bumped into him. Hoag steadied himself and assumed the look of paternal kindliness which he used to deal with children. "Whoa, there, young fellow!" He took the boy by the shoulder and gently dislodged him.

"Maurice!" The voice screamed near his ear, shrill and senseless. It came from a large woman, smugly fat, who had projected herself out of the door of the delicatessen. She grabbed the boy's other arm, jerking him away and aiming a swipe at his ear with her free hand as she did so. Hoag started to plead on the boy's behalf when he saw that the woman was glaring at him. The youngster, seeing or sensing his mother's attitude, kicked at Hoag.

The skate clipped him in the shin. It hurt. He hurried away with no other purpose than to get out of sight. He turned down the first side street, his shin causing him to limp a little, and his ears and the back of his neck burning quite as if he had indeed been caught mistreating the brat. The side street was not much better than the street he had left. It was not lined with shops nor dominated by the harsh steel tunnel of the elevated's tracks, but it was solid with apartment houses, four stories high and crowded, little better than tenements.

Poets have sung of the beauty and innocence of childhood. But it could not have been this street, seen through Hoag's eyes, that they had in mind. The small boys seemed rat-faced to him, sharp beyond their years, sharp and shallow and snide. The little girls were no better in his eyes. Those of eight or nine, the shapeless stringy age, seemed to him to have tattletale written in their pinched faces—mean souls, born for trouble-making and cruel gossip. Their slightly older sisters, gutter-wise too young, seemed entirely concerned with advertising their arrogant new sex—not for Hoag's benefit, but for their pimply counterparts loafing around the drugstore.

Even the brats in baby carriages—Hoag fancied that he liked babies, enjoyed himself in the role of honorary uncle. Not these. Snotty-nosed and sour-smelling, squalid and squalling—

The little hotel was like a thousand others, definitely third rate without pretension, a single bit of neon reading: "Hotel Manchester, Transient & Permanent," a lobby only a half lot wide, long and narrow and a little dark. You do not see such if you are not looking for them. They are stopped at by drummers careful of their expense accounts and are lived in by bachelors who can't afford better. The single elevator is an iron-grille cage, somewhat disguised with bronze paint. The lobby floor is tile, the cuspidors are brass. In addition to the clerk's desk there are two discouraged potted palms and eight leather armchairs. Unattached old men, who seem never to have had a past, sit in these chairs, live in the rooms above, and every now and then one is found hanging in his room, necktie to light fixture.

Hoag backed into the door of the Manchester to avoid being caught in a surge of children charging along the sidewalk. Some sort of game, apparently—he caught the tail end of a shrill chant, "—give him a slap to shut his trap; the last one home's a dirty Jap!"

"Looking for someone, sir? Or did you wish a room?"

He turned quickly around, a little surprised. A room? What he wanted was his own snug apartment but at the moment a room, any room at all, in which he could be alone with a locked door between himself and the world seemed the most desirable thing possible. "Yes, I do want a room."

The clerk turned the register around. "With or without? Two fifty with, a dollar and a half without."

"With."

The clerk watched him sign, but did not reach for the key until Hoag counted out two ones and a half. "Glad to have you with us. Bill! Show Mr. Hoag up to 412."

The lone bellman ushered him into the cage, looked him up and down with one eye, noting the expensive cut of his topcoat and the absence of baggage. Once in 412 he raised the window a trifle, switched on the bathroom light, and stood by the door.

"Looking for someone?" he suggested. "Need any help?"

Hoag tipped him. "Get out," he said hoarsely.

The bellman wiped off the smirk. "Suit yourself," he shrugged.

The room contained one double bed, one chest of drawers with mirror, one straight chair and one armchair. Over the bed was a framed print titled "The Colosseum by Moonlight." But the door was lockable and equipped with a bolt as well and the window faced the alley, away from the street. Hoag sat down in the armchair. It had a broken spring, but he did not mind.

He took off his gloves and stared at his nails. They were quite clean. Could the whole thing have been hallucination? Had he ever gone to consult Dr. Potbury? A man who has had amnesia may have it again, he supposed, and hallucinations as well.

Even so, it could not all be hallucination; he remembered the incident too vividly. Or could it be? He strained to recall exactly what had happened.

Today was Wednesday, his customary day off. Yesterday he had returned home from work as usual. He had been getting ready to dress for dinner—somewhat absent-mindedly, he recalled, as he had actually been thinking about where he would dine, whether to try a new Italian place recommended by his friends, the Robertsons, or whether it would be more pleasing to return again for the undoubtedly sound goulash prepared by the chef at the Buda-Pesth.

He had about decided in favor of the safer course when the telephone had rung. He had almost missed it, as the tap was running in the washbasin. He had thought that he heard something and had turned off the tap. Surely enough, the phone rang again.

It was Mrs. Pomeroy Jameson, one of his favorite hostesses—not only a charming woman for herself but possessed of a cook who could make clear soups that were not dishwater. And sauces. She had offered a solution to his problem. "I've been suddenly left in the lurch at the last moment and I've just got to have another man for dinner. Are you free? Could you help me? You could? Dear Mr. Hoag!"

It had been a very pleasant thought and he had not in the least resented being asked to fill in at the last minute. After all, one can't expect to be invited to every small dinner. He had been delighted to oblige Edith Pomeroy. She

served an unpretentious but sound dry white wine with fish and she never committed the vulgarism of serving champagne at any time. A good hostess and he was glad she felt free to ask him for help. It was a tribute to him that she felt that he would fit in, unplanned.

He had had such thoughts on his mind, he remembered, as he dressed. Probably, in his preoccupation, what with the interruption of the phone call breaking his routine, he had neglected to scrub his nails.

It must have been that. Certainly there had been no opportunity to dirty his nails so atrociously on the way to the Pomeroys'. After all, one wore gloves.

It had been Mrs. Pomeroy's sister-in-law—a woman he preferred to avoid!—who had called his attention to his nails. She had been insisting with the positiveness called "modern" that every man's occupation was written on his person. "Take my husband—what could he be but a lawyer? Look at him. And you, Dr. Fitts—the bedside manner!"

"Not at dinner, I hope."

"You can't shake it."

"But you haven't proved your point. You *knew* what we are."

Whereupon that impossible woman had looked around the table and nailed him with her eye. "Mr. Hoag can test me. I don't know what he does. No one does."

"Really, Julia." Mrs. Pomeroy had tried hopelessly to intervene, then had turned to the man on her left with a smile. "Julia has been studying psychology this season."

The man on her left, Sudkins, or Snuggins—Stubbins, that was his name. Stubbins had said, "What does Mr. Hoag do?"

"It's a minor mystery. He never talks shop."

"It's not that," Hoag had offered. "I do not consider—"

"Don't tell me!" that woman had commanded. "I'll have it in a moment. Some profession. I can see you with a brief case." He had not intended to tell her. Some subjects were dinner conversation; some were not. But she had gone on.

"You might be in finance. You might be an art dealer or a book fancier. Or you might be a writer. Let me see your hands."

He was mildly put off by the demand, but he had placed his hands on the table without trepidation. That woman had pounced on him. "Got you! You are a chemist."

Everyone looked where she pointed. Everyone saw the dark mourning under his nails. Her husband had broken the brief silence by saying, "Nonsense, Julia. There are dozens of things that will stain nails. Hoag may dabble in photography, or do a spot of engraving. Your inference wouldn't stand in court."

"That's a lawyer for you! I know I'm right. Aren't I, Mr. Hoag?"

He himself had been staring unbrokenly at his hands. To be caught at a dinner party with untidy manicure would have been distressing enough—*if* he had been able to understand it.

But he had no slightest idea how his nails had become dirtied. At his work? Obviously—but what did he *do* in the daytime?

He did not know.

"Tell us, Mr. Hoag. I was right, was I not?"

He pulled his eyes away from those horrid fingernails and said faintly, "I must ask to be excused." With that he had fled from the table. He had found his way to the lavatory where, conquering an irrational revulsion, he had cleaned out the gummy reddish-brown filth with the blade of his penknife. The stuff stuck to the blade; he wiped it on cleansing tissue, wadded it up, and stuck it into a pocket of his waistcoat. Then he had scrubbed his nails, over and over again.

He could not recall when he had become convinced that the stuff was blood, was human blood.

He had managed to find his bowler, his coat, gloves, and stick without recourse to the maid. He let himself out and got away from there as fast as he could.

Thinking it over in the quiet of the dingy hotel room he was convinced that his first fear had been an instinctive revulsion at the sight of that dark-red tar under his nails. It was only on second thought that he had realized that he did not remember where he had dirtied his nails because he had no recollection of where he had been that day, nor the day before, nor any of the days before that. He did not know what his profession was.

It was preposterous, but it was terribly frightening.

He skipped dinner entirely rather than leave the dingy quiet of the hotel room; about ten o'clock he drew a tub of water just as hot as he could get it and let himself soak. It relaxed him somewhat and his twisted thoughts quieted down. In any case, he consoled himself, if he could not remember his occupation, then he certainly could not return to it. No chance again of finding that grisly horror under his fingernails.

He dried himself off and crawled under the covers. In spite of the strange bed he managed to get to sleep.

A nightmare jerked him awake, although he did not realize it at first, as the tawdry surroundings seemed to fit the nightmare. When he did recall where he was and why he was there the nightmare seemed preferable, but by that time it was gone, washed out of his mind. His watch

told him that it was his usual getting-up time; he rang for the bellman and arranged for a breakfast tray to be fetched from around the corner.

By the time it arrived he was dressed in the only clothes he had with him and was becoming anxious to get home. He drank two cups of indifferent coffee standing up, fiddled with the food, then left the hotel.

After letting himself into his apartment he hung up his coat and hat, took off his gloves, and went as usual straight to his dressing room. He had carefully scrubbed the nails of his left hand and was just commencing on his right when he noticed what he was doing.

The nails of his left hand were white and clean; those of the right were dark and dirty. Carefully holding himself in check he straightened up, stepped over and examined his watch where he had laid it on his dresser, then compared the time with that shown by the electric clock in his bedroom. It was ten minutes past six p. m.—his usual time for returning home in the *evening*.

He might not recall his profession; his profession had certainly not forgotten him.

II.

The firm of Randall & Craig, Confidential Investigation, maintained its night phone in a double apartment. This was convenient, as Randall had married Craig early in their association. The junior partner had just put the supper dishes to soak and was trying to find out whether or not she wanted to keep the book-of-the-month when the telephone rang. She reached out, took the receiver, and said, "Yes?" in noncommittal tones.

To this she added, "Yes."

The senior partner stopped what he was doing—he was engaged in a ticklish piece of scientific research, involving deadly weapons, ballistics, and some esoteric aspects of aërodynamics; specifically he was trying to perfect his overhand throw with darts, using a rotogravure likeness of café society's latest glamour girl thumbtacked to the bread board as a target. One dart had nailed her left eye; he was trying to match it in the right.

"Yes," his wife said again.

"Try saying 'No,'" he suggested.

She cupped the mouthpiece. "Shut up and hand me a pencil." She made a long arm across the breakfast-nook table and obtained a stenographer's pad from a hook there. "Yes. Go ahead." Accepting the pencil she made several lines of the hooks and scrawls that stenographers use in place of writing. "It seems most unlikely," she said at last. "Mr. Randall is not usually in at this hour. He much prefers to see clients during office hours. Mr. Craig? No, I'm sure Mr. Craig couldn't help you. Positive. So? Hold the line and I'll find out."

Randall made one more try at the lovely lady; the dart stuck in the leg of the radio-record player. "Well?"

"There is a character on the other end of this who wants to see you very badly tonight. Name of Hoag, Jonathan Hoag. Claims that it is a physical impossibility for him to come to see you in the daytime. Didn't want to state his business and got all mixed up when he tried to."

"Gentleman or lug?"

"Gentleman."

"Money?"

"Sounds like it. Didn't seem worried about it. Better take it, Teddy. March 15th is coming up."

"O. K. Pass it over."

She waved him back and spoke again into the phone. "I've managed to locate Mr. Randall. I think he will be able to speak with you in a moment or two. Will you hold the line, please?" Still holding the phone away from her husband she consulted her watch, carefully counted off thirty seconds, then said, "Ready with Mr. Randall. Go ahead, Mr. Hoag," and slipped the instrument to her husband.

"Edward Randall speaking. What is it, Mr. Hoag?

"Oh, really now, Mr. Hoag, I think you had better come in in the morning. We are all human and we like our rest— I do, anyhow.

"I must warn you, Mr. Hoag, my prices go up when the sun goes down.

"Well, now, let me see— I was just leaving for home. Matter of fact, I just talked with my wife so she's expecting me. You know how women are. But if you could stop by my home in twenty minutes, at . . . uh . . . seventeen minutes past eight, we could talk for a few minutes. All right—got a pencil handy? Here is the address—" He cradled the phone.

"What am I this time? Wife, partner, or secretary?"

"What do you think? You talked to him."

"'Wife,' I'd guess. His voice sounded prissy."

"O. K."

"I'll change to a dinner gown. And you had better get your toys up off the floor, Brain."

"Oh, I don't know. It gives a nice touch of eccentricity."

"Maybe you'd like some shag tobacco in a carpet slipper. Or some Regie cigarettes." She moved around the room, switching off the overhead lights and arranging table and floor lamps so that the chair a visitor would naturally sit in would be well lighted.

Without answering he gathered up his darts

and the bread board, stopping as he did so to moisten his finger and rub the spot where he had marred the radio, then dumped the whole collection into the kitchen and closed the door. In the subdued light, with the kitchen and breakfast nook no longer visible, the room looked serenely opulent.

"How do you do, sir? Mr. Hoag, my dear. Mr. Hoag . . . Mrs. Randall."

"How do you do, madame?"

Randall helped him off with his coat, assuring himself in the process that Mr. Hoag was not armed, or—if he was—he had found somewhere other than shoulder or hip to carry a gun. Randall was not suspicious, but he was pragmatically pessimistic.

"Sit down, Mr. Hoag. Cigarette?"

"No. No, thank you."

Randall said nothing in reply. He sat and stared, not rudely but mildly, nevertheless thoroughly. The suit might be English or it might be Brooks Brothers. It was certainly not Hart, Schaffner & Marx. A tie of that quality had to be termed a cravat, although it was modest as a nun. He upped his fee mentally. The little man was nervous—he wouldn't relax in his chair. Woman's presence, probably. Good—let him come to a slow simmer, then move him off the fire.

"You need not mind the presence of Mrs. Randall," he said presently. "Anything that I may hear, she may hear also."

"Oh . . . oh, yes. Yes, indeed." He bowed from the waist without getting up. "I am very happy to have Mrs. Randall present." But he did not go on to say what his business was.

"Well, Mr. Hoag," Randall added presently, "you wished to consult me about something, did you not?"

"Uh, yes."

"Then perhaps you had better tell me about it."

"Yes, surely. It— That is to say— Mr. Randall, the whole business is preposterous."

"Most businesses are. But go ahead. Woman trouble? Or has someone been sending you threatening letters?"

"Oh, no! Nothing as simple as that. But I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know," Hoag answered quickly with a little intake of breath. "I want you to find out."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Hoag," Randall said. "This seems to be getting more confused rather than less. You say you are afraid and you want me to find out what you are afraid of. Now I'm not a psychoanalyst; I'm a detective. What is there about this business that a detective can do?"

Hoag looked unhappy, then blurted out, "I want you to find out what I do in the daytime."

Randall looked him over, then said slowly, "You want *me* to find out what *you* do in the daytime?"

"Yes. Yes, that's it."

"Mm-m-m. Wouldn't it be easier for you to *tell* me what you do?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Randall was becoming somewhat annoyed. "Mr. Hoag," he said, "I usually charge double for playing guessing games. If you won't tell me what you do in the daytime, it seems to me to indicate a lack of confidence in me which will make it very difficult indeed to assist you. Now come clean with me—what is it you do in the daytime and what has it to do with the case? What *is* the case?"

Mr. Hoag stood up. "I might have known I couldn't explain it," he said unhappily, more to himself than to Randall. "I'm sorry I disturbed you. I—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Hoag." Cynthia Craig Randall spoke for the first time. "I think perhaps you two have misunderstood each other. You mean, do you not, that you really and literally do not *know* what you do in the daytime?"

"Yes," he said gratefully. "Yes, that is exactly it."

"And you want us to find out what you do? Shadow you, find out where you go, and tell you what you have been doing?"

Hoag nodded emphatically. "That is what I have been trying to say."

Randall glanced from Hoag to his wife and back to Hoag. "Let's get this straight," he said slowly. "You really don't know what you do in the daytime and you want me to find out. How long has this been going on?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Well—what *do* you know?"

Hoag managed to tell his story, with prompting. His recollection of any sort ran back about five years, to the St. George Rest Home in Dubuque. Incurable amnesia—it no longer worried him and he had regarded himself as completely rehabilitated. They—the hospital authorities—had found a job for him when he was discharged.

"What sort of a job?"

He did not know that. Presumably it was the same job he now held, his present occupation. He had been strongly advised, when he left the rest home, never to worry about his work, never to take his work home with him, even in his thoughts. "You see," Hoag explained, "they work on the theory that amnesia is brought on by overwork and worry. I remember Dr. Rennault telling me emphatically that I must never talk shop,

never let my mind dwell on the day's work. When I got home at night I was to forget such things and occupy myself with pleasant subjects. So I tried to do that."

"Hm-m-m. You certainly seem to have been successful, almost too successful for belief. See here—did they use hypnosis on you in treating you?"

"Why, I really don't know."

"Must have. How about it, Cyn? Does it fit?"

His wife nodded. "It fits. Posthypnosis. After five years of it he couldn't possibly think about his work after hours no matter how he tried. Seems like a very odd therapy, however."

Randall was satisfied. She handled matters psychological. Whether she got her answers from her rather extensive formal study, or straight out of her subconscious, he neither knew nor gave a hang. They seemed to work. "Something still bothers me," he added. "You go along for five years, apparently never knowing where or how you work. Why this sudden yearning to know?"

He told them the story of the dinner-table discussion, the strange substance under his nails, and the non-co-operative doctor. "I'm frightened," he said miserably. "I thought it was blood. And now I know it's something—worse."

Randall looked at him. "Why?"

Hoag moistened his lips. "Because—" He paused and looked helpless. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Randall straightened up. "This isn't in my line," he said. "You need help all right, but you need help from a psychiatrist. Amnesia isn't in my line. I'm a detective."

"But I *want* a detective. I want you to watch me and find out what I do."

Randall started to refuse; his wife interrupted. "I'm sure we can help you, Mr. Hoag. Perhaps you should see a psychiatrist—"

"Oh, no!"

"—but if you wish to be shadowed, it will be done."

"I don't like it," said Randall. "He doesn't need us."

Hoag laid his gloves on the side table and reached into his breast pocket. "I'll make it worth your while." He started counting out bills. "I brought only five hundred," he said anxiously. "Is it enough?"

"It will do," she told him.

"As a retainer," Randall added. He accepted the money and stuffed it into his side pocket. "By the way," he added, "if you don't know what you do during business hours and you have no more background than a hospital, where do you get the money?" He made his voice casual.

"Oh, I get paid every Sunday. Two hundred dollars, in bills."

When he had gone Randall handed the cash over to his wife. "Pretty little tickets," she said, smoothing them out and folding them neatly. "Teddy, why did you try to queer the pitch?"

"Me? I didn't— I was just running up the price. The old 'get-away-closer.'"

"That's what I thought. But you almost overdid it."

"Not at all. I knew I could depend on you. *You* wouldn't let him out of the house with a nickel left on him."

She smiled happily. "You're a nice man, Teddy. And we have so much in common. We both like money. How much of his story did you believe?"

"Not a damned word of it."

"Neither did I. He's rather a horrid little beast— I wonder what he's up to."

"I don't know, but I mean to find out."

"You aren't going to shadow him yourself, are you?"

"Why not? Why pay ten dollars a day to some ex-flattie to muff it?"

"Teddy, I don't like the set-up. Why should he be willing to pay this much"—she gestured with the bills—"to lead you around by the nose?"

"That is what I'm going to find out."

"You be careful. You remember 'The Red-headed League.'"

"The 'Red-headed—' Oh, Sherlock Holmes again. Be your age, Cyn."

"I am. You be yours. That little man is *evil.*"

She left the room and cached the money. When she returned he was down on his knees by the chair in which Hoag had sat, busy with an insufflator. He looked around as she came in.

"Cyn—"

"Yes, Brain."

"You haven't touched this chair?"

"Of course not. I polished the arms as usual before he showed up."

"That's not what I mean. I meant since he left. Did he ever take off his gloves?"

"Wait a minute. Yes, I'm sure he did. I looked at his nails when he told his yarn about them."

"So did I, but I wanted to make sure I wasn't nuts. Take a look at that surface."

She examined the polished chair arms, now covered with a thin film of gray dust. The surface was unbroken—no fingerprints. "He must never have touched them— But he *did.* I *saw* him. When he said, 'I'm frightened,' he gripped both arms. I remember noticing how blue his knuckles looked."

"Collodion, maybe?"

"Don't be silly. There isn't even a smear. You shook hands with him. Did he have collodion on his hands?"

"I don't think so. I think I would have noticed

it. The Man with No Fingerprints. Let's call him a ghost and forget it."

"Ghosts don't pay out hard cash to be watched."

"No, they don't. Not that I ever heard of." He stood up and marched out into the breakfast nook, grabbed the phone and dialed long distance. "I want the Medical Exchange in Dubuque, uh—" He cupped the phone and called to his wife. "Say, honey, what the hell State *is* Dubuque in?"

Forty-five minutes and several calls later he slammed the instrument back into its cradle. "That tears it," he announced. "There is no St. George Rest Home in Dubuque. There never was and probably never will be. And no Dr. Rennault."

III.

"There he is!" Cynthia Craig Randall nudged her husband.

He continued to hold the *Tribune* in front of his face as if reading it. "I see him," he said quietly. "Control yourself. Yuh'd think you had never tailed a man before. Easy does it."

"Teddy, do be careful."

"I will be." He glanced over the top of the paper and watched Jonathan Hoag come down the steps of the swank Gotham Apartments in which he made his home. When he left the shelter of the canopy he turned to the left. The time was exactly seven minutes before nine in the morning.

Randall stood up, folded his paper with care, and laid it down on the bus-station bench on which he had been waiting. He then turned toward the drugstore behind him, dropped a penny in the slot of a gum-vending machine in the shop's recessed doorway. In the mirror on the face of the machine he watched Hoag's unhurried progress down the far side of the street. With equal lack of rush he started after him, without crossing the street.

Cynthia waited on the bench until Randall had had time enough to get a half block ahead of her, then got up and followed him.

Hoag climbed on a bus at the second corner. Randall took advantage of a traffic-light change which held the bus at the corner, crossed against the lights, and managed to reach the bus just as it was pulling out. Hoag had gone up to the open deck; Randall seated himself down below.

Cynthia was too late to catch the bus, but not

too late to note its number. She yoohooed at the first cruising taxi that came by, told the driver the number of the bus, and set out. They covered twelve blocks before the bus came in sight; three blocks later a red light enabled the driver to pull up alongside the bus. She spotted her husband inside; it was all she needed to know. She occupied the time for the rest of the ride in keeping the exact amount shown by the meter plus a quarter tip counted out in her hand.

When she saw them get out of the bus she told the driver to pull up. He did so, a few yards beyond the bus stop. Unfortunately they were headed in her direction; she did not wish to get out at once. She paid the driver the exact amount of the tariff while keeping one eye—the one in the back of her head—on the two men. The driver looked at her curiously.

"Do you chase after women?" she said suddenly.

"No, lady. I gotta family."

"*My* husband does," she said bitterly and untruthfully. "Here." She handed him the quarter.

Hoag and Randall were some yards past by now. She got out, headed for the shop just across the walk, and waited. To her surprise she saw Hoag turn and speak to her husband. She was too far away to hear what was said.

She hesitated to join them. The picture was wrong; it made her apprehensive—yet her husband seemed unconcerned. He listened quietly to what Hoag had to say, then the two of them entered the office building in front of which they had been standing.

She closed in at once. The lobby of the office building was as crowded as one might expect at such an hour in the morning. Six elevators, in bank, were doing rushing business. No. 2 had just slammed its doors, No. 3 had just started to load. They were not in No. 3; she posted herself near the cigar stand and quickly cased the place.

They were not in the lobby. Nor were they, she quickly made sure, in the barber shop which opened off the lobby. They had probably been the last passengers to catch Elevator No. 2 on its last trip. She had been watching the indicator for No. 2 without learning anything useful from it; the car had stopped at nearly every floor.

No. 2 was back down by now; she made herself one of its passengers, not the first nor the last, but one of the crowd. She did not name a floor, but waited until the last of the others had gotten off.

The elevator boy raised his eyebrows at her. "Floor, please!" he commanded.

She displayed a dollar bill. "I want to talk to you."

He closed the gates, accomplishing an intimate privacy. "Make it snappy," he said, glancing at the signals on his board.

"Two men got on together your last trip." She described them, quickly and vividly. "I want to know what floor they got off at."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't know. This is the rush hour."

She added another bill. "Think. They were probably the last two to get aboard. Maybe they had to step out to let others off. The shorter one probably called out the floor."

He shook his head again. "Even if you made it a fin I couldn't tell you. During the rush Lady Godiva *and* her horse could ride this cage and I wouldn't know it. Now—do you want to get out or go down?"

"Down." She handed him one of the bills. "Thanks for trying."

He looked at it, shrugged, and pocketed it.

There was nothing to do but to take up her post in the lobby. She did so, fuming. Done in, she thought, done in by the oldest trick known for shaking a tail. Call yourself a dick and get taken in by the office-building trick! They were probably out of the building and gone by now, with Teddy wondering where she was and maybe needing her to back up his play.

She ought to take up tatting! Damn!

She bought a bottle of Pepsi-Cola at the cigar stand and drank it slowly, standing up. She was just wondering whether or not she could stand another, in the interest of protective coloration, when Randall appeared.

It took the flood of relief that swept over her to make her realize how much she had been afraid. Nevertheless, she did not break character. She turned her head away, knowing that her husband would see her and recognize the back of her neck quite as well as her face.

He did not come up and speak to her, therefore she took position on him again. Hoag she could not see anywhere; had she missed him herself, or what?

Randall walked down to the corner, glanced speculatively at a stand of taxis, then swung aboard a bus which had just drawn up to its stop. She followed him, allowing several others to mount it before her. The bus pulled away. Hoag had certainly not gotten aboard; she concluded that it was safe to break the routine.

He looked up as she sat down beside him. "Cyn! I thought we had lost you."

"You darn near did," she admitted. "Tell me —what's cookin'?"

"Wait till we get to the office."

She did not wish to wait, but she subsided. The bus they had entered took them directly to their office, a mere half-dozen blocks away. When they were there he unlocked the door of the tiny suite and went at once to the telephone. Their

listed office phone was connected through the PBX of a secretarial service.

"Any calls?" he asked, then listened for a moment. "O. K. Send up the slips. No hurry."

He put the phone down and turned to his wife. "Well, babe, that's just about the easiest five hundred we ever promoted."

"You found out what he does with himself?"

"Of course."

"What does he do?"

"Guess."

She eyed him. "How would you like a paste in the snoot?"

"Keep your pants on. You wouldn't guess it, though it's simple enough. He works for a commercial jeweler—polishes gems. You know that stuff he found under his fingernails, that got him so upset?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing to it. Jeweler's rouge. With the aid of a diseased imagination he jumps to the conclusion it's dried blood. So we make half a grand."

"Mm-m-m. And that seems to be that. This place he works is somewhere in the Acme Building, I suppose."

"Room 1310. Or rather Suite 1310. Why didn't you tag along?"

She hesitated a little in replying. She did not want to admit how clumsy she had been, but the habit of complete honesty with each other was strong upon her. "I let myself get misled when Hoag spoke to you outside the Acme Building. I missed you at the elevator."

"I see. Well, I— Say! What did you say? Did you say Hoag *spoke* to me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"But he didn't speak to me. He never laid eyes on me. What are you talking about?"

"What am *I* talking about? What are *you* talking about! Just before the two of you went into the Acme Building, Hoag stopped, turned around and spoke to you. The two of you stood there chinning, which threw me off stride. Then you went into the lobby together, practically arm in arm."

He sat there, saying nothing, looking at her for a long moment. At last she said, "Don't sit there staring like a goon! That's what happened."

He said, "Cyn, listen to my story. I got off the bus after he did and followed him into the lobby. I used the old heel-and-toe getting into the elevator and swung behind him when he faced the front of the car. When he got out, I hung back, then fiddled around, half in and half out, asking the operator simpleton questions, and giving him long enough to get clear. When I turned the corner he was just disappearing into 1310. He never spoke to me. He never saw my face. I'm sure of that."

She was looking white, but all she said was, "Go on."

"When you go in this place there is a long glass partition on your right, with benches built up against it. You can look through the glass and see the jewelers, or jewelsmiths, or whatever you call 'em, at work. Clever—good salesmanship. Hoag ducked right on in and by the time I passed down the aisle he was already on the other side, his coat off and a smock on, and one of those magnifying dinguses screwed into his eye. I went on past him to the desk—he never looked up—and asked for the manager. Presently a little birdlike guy shows up and I ask him if they have a man named Jonathan Hoag in their employ. He says yes and ask if I want to speak to him. I told him no, that I was an investigator for an insurance company. He wants to know if there is anything wrong and I told him that it was simply a routine investigation of what he had said on his application for a life policy, and how long had he worked there? Five years, he told me. He said that Hoag was one of their most reliable and skillful employees. I said fine, and asked if he thought Mr. Hoag could afford to carry as much as ten thousand. He says certainly and that they were always glad to see their employees invest in life insurance. Which was what I had figured when I gave him the stall.

"As I went out I stopped in front of Hoag's bench and looked at him through the glass. Presently he looked up and stared at me, then looked down again. I'm sure I would have spotted it if he had recognized me. A case of complete skeezo, sheezo . . . how do you pronounce it?"

"Schizophrenia. Completely split personalities. But look, Teddy—"

"Yeah?"

"You *did* talk with him. I saw you."

"Now slow down, puss. You may think you did, but you must have been looking at two other guys. How far away were you?"

"Not *that* far. I was standing in front of Beecham's Bootery. Then comes *Chez Louis*, and then the entrance to the Acme Building. You had your back to the newspaper stand at the curb and were practically facing me. Hoag had his back to me, but I couldn't have been mistaken, as I had him in full profile when the two of you turned and went into the building together."

Randall looked exasperated. "I didn't speak with him. And I didn't go in with him; I followed him in."

"Edward Randall, don't give me that! I admit I lost the two of you, but that's no reason to rub it in by trying to make a fool of me."

Randall had been married too long and too

comfortably not to respect danger signals. He got up, went to her, and put an arm around her. "Look, kid," he said, seriously and gently, "I'm not pulling your leg. We've got our wires crossed somehow, but I'm giving it to you just as straight as I can, the way I remember it."

She searched his eyes, then kissed him suddenly, and pulled away. "All right. We're both right and it's impossible. Come on."

"'Come on' where?"

"To the scene of the crime. If I don't get this straightened out I'll never sleep again."

The Acme Building was just where they had left it. The Bootery was where it belonged, likewise *Chez Louis,* and the newsstand. He stood where she had stood and agreed that she could not have been mistaken in her identification unless blind drunk. But he was equally positive as to what he had done.

"You didn't pick up a snifter or two on the way, did you?" he suggested hopefully.

"Certainly not."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do, too! We're all finished with Hoag, aren't we? You've traced him down and that's that."

"Yes . . . why?"

"Take me up to where he works. I want to ask his daytime personality whether or not he spoke to you getting off the bus."

He shrugged. "O. K., kid. It's your party."

Then went inside and entered the first free elevator. The starter clicked his castanets, the operator slammed his doors and said, "Floors, please."

Six, three, and nine. Randall waited until those had been served before announcing, "Thirteen."

The operator looked around. "I can give you twelve and fourteen, buddy, and you can split 'em."

"Huh?"

"There ain't no thirteenth floor. If there was, nobody would rent on it."

"You must be mistaken. I was on it this morning."

The operator gave him a look of marked restraint. "See for yourself." He shot the car upward and halted it. "Twelve." He raised the car slowly, the figure 12 slid out of sight and was quickly replaced by another. "Fourteeen. Which way will you have it?"

"I'm sorry," Randall admitted. "I've made a silly mistake. I really was in here this morning and I thought I had noted the floor."

"Might ha' been eighteen," suggested the operator. "Sometimes an eight will look like a three. Who you lookin' for?"

"Detheridge & Co. They're manufacturing jewelers."

The operator shook his head. "Not in this building. No jewelers, and no Detheridge."

"You're sure?"

Instead of answering, the operator dropped his car back to the tenth floor. "Try 1001. It's the office of the building."

No, they had no Detheridge. No, no jewelers, manufacturing or otherwise. Could it be the Apex Building the gentleman wanted, rather than the Acme? Randall thanked them and left, considerably shaken.

Cynthia had maintained complete silence during the proceedings. Now she said, "Darling—"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"We could go up to the top floor and work down."

"Why bother? If they were here, the building office would know about it."

"So they would, but they might not be telling. There is something fishy about this whole business. Come to think about it, you could hide a whole floor of an office building by making its door look like a blank wall."

"No, that's silly. I'm just losing my mind, that's all. You better take me to a doctor."

"It's not silly and you're not losing your grip. How do you count height in an elevator? By floors. If you didn't see a floor, you would never realize an extra one was tucked in. We may be on the trail of something big." She did not really believe her own arguments, but she knew that he needed something to do.

He started to agree, then checked himself. "How about the stairways? You're bound to notice a floor from a staircase."

"Maybe there is some hanky-panky with the staircases, too. If so, we'll be looking for it. Come on."

But there was not. There were exactly the same number of steps—eighteen—between floors twelve and fourteen as there were between any other pair of adjacent floors. They worked down from the top floor and examined the lettering on each frosted-glass door. This took them rather long, as Cynthia would not listen to Randall's suggestion that they split up and take half a floor apiece. She wanted him in her sight.

No thirteenth floor and nowhere a door which announced the tenancy of a firm of manufacturing jewelers, neither Detheridge & Co. nor any other name. There was not time to do more than read the firm names on the doors; to have entered each office, on one pretext or another, would have taken much more than a day.

Randall stared thoughtfully at a door labeled: "Pride, Greenway, Hamilton, Steinbolt, Carter & Greenway, Attorneys at Law." "By this time," he mused, "they could have changed the lettering on the door."

"Not on *that* one," she pointed out. "Anyhow, if it was a set-up, they could have cleaned out the whole joint, too. Changed it so you wouldn't recognize it." Nevertheless she stared at the innocent-seeming letters thoughtfully. An office building was a terribly remote and secret place. Soundproof walls, Venetian blinds—and a meaningless firm name. Anything could go on in such a place—anything. Nobody would know. Nobody would care. No one would ever notice. No policeman on his beat, neighbors as remote as the moon, not even scrub service if the tenant did not wish it. As long as the rent was paid on time, the management would leave a tenant alone. Any crime you fancied and park the bodies in the closet.

She shivered. "Come on, Teddy. Let's hurry."

They covered the remaining floors as quickly as possible and came out at last in the lobby. Cynthia felt warmed by the sight of faces and sunlight, even though they had not found the missing firm. Randall stopped on the steps and looked around. "Do you suppose we *could* have been in a different building?" he said doubtfully.

"Not a chance. See that cigar stand? I practically lived there. I know every flyspeck on the counter."

"Then what's the answer?"

"Lunch is the answer. Come on."

"O. K. But I'm going to drink mine."

She managed to persuade him to encompass a plate of corned-beef hash after the third whiskey sour. That and two cups of coffee left him entirely sober, but unhappy. "Cyn—"

"Yes, Teddy."

"What happened to me?"

She answered slowly. "I think you were made the victim of an amazing piece of hypnosis."

"So do I—now. Either that, or I've finally cracked up. So call it hypnosis. I want to know why."

She made doodles with her fork. "I'm not sure that I want to know. You know what I would like to do, Teddy?"

"What?"

"I would like to send Mr. Hoag's five hundred dollars back to him with a message that we can't help him, so we are returning his money."

He stared at her. "Send the money back? Good heavens!"

Her face looked as if she had been caught making an indecent suggestion, but she went on stubbornly. "I know. Just the same, that's what I would like to do. We can make enough on divorce cases and skip-tracing to eat on. We don't have to monkey with a thing like this."

"You talk like five hundred was something you'd use to tip a waiter."

"No, I don't. I just don't think it's enough to risk your neck—or your sanity—for. Look, Teddy, somebody is trying to get us in the nine hole; before we go any further, I want to know *why*."

"And I want to know why, too. Which is why I'm not willing to drop the matter. Damn it, I don't like having shenanigans put over on me."

"What are you going to tell Mr. Hoag?"

He ran a hand through his hair, which did not matter as it was already mussed. "I don't know. Suppose you talk to him. Give him a stall."

"That's a *fine* idea. That's a *swell* idea. I'll tell him you've broken your leg but you'll be all right tomorrow."

"Don't be like that, Cyn. You know you can handle him."

"All right. But you've got to promise me this, Teddy"

"Promise what?"

"As long as we're on this case we do everything together."

"Don't we always?"

"I mean really together. I don't want you out of my sight *any* of the time."

"But see here, Cyn, that may not be practical."

"Promise."

"O. K., O. K. I promise."

"That's better." She relaxed and looked almost happy. "Hadn't we better get back to the office?"

"The hell with it. Let's go out and take in a triple feature."

"O. K., Brain." She gathered up her gloves and purse.

The movies failed to amuse him, although they had selected an all-Western bill, a fare of which he was inordinately fond. But the hero seemed as villainous as the foreman, and the mysterious masked riders, for once, appeared really sinister. And he kept seeing the thirteenth floor of the Acme Building, the long glass partition behind which the craftsmen labored, and the little dried-up manager of Detheridge & Co. Damn it—could a man be hypnotized into believing that he had seen anything as detailed as that?

Cynthia hardly noticed the pictures. She was preoccupied with the people around them. She found herself studying their faces guardedly whenever the lights went up. If they looked like this when they were amusing themselves, what were they like when they were unhappy? With rare exceptions the faces looked, at the best, stolidly uncomplaining. Discontent, the grim marks of physical pain, lonely unhappiness, frustration, and stupid meanness she found in numbers, but rarely a merry face. Even Teddy, whose habitual debonair gaiety was one of his chief virtues, was looking dour—with reason, she conceded. She wondered what were the reasons for those other unhappy masks.

She recalled once having seen a painting entitled "Subway." It showed a crowd pouring out the door of an underground train while another crowd attempted to force its way in. Getting on or getting off, they were plainly in a hurry, yet it seemed to give them no pleasure. The picture had no beauty in itself; it was plain that the artist's single purpose had been to make a bitter criticism of a way of living.

She was glad when the show was over and they could escape to the comparative freedom of the street. Randall flagged a taxi and they started home.

"Teddy—"

"Uh?"

"Did you notice the faces of the people in the theater?"

"No, not especially. Why?"

"Not a one of them looked as if they got any fun out of life."

"Maybe they don't."

"But why don't they? Look—we have fun, don't we?"

"You bet."

"We always have fun. Even when we were broke and trying to get the business started we had fun. We went to bed smiling and got up happy. We still do. What's the answer?"

He smiled for the first time since the search for the thirteenth floor and pinched her. "It's fun living with you, kid."

"Thanks. And right back at you. You know, when I was a little girl, I had a funny idea."

"Spill it."

"I was happy myself, but as I grew up I could see that my mother wasn't. And my father wasn't. My teachers weren't—most of the adults around me weren't happy. I got an idea in my head that when you grew up you found out something that kept you from ever being happy again. You know how a kid is treated: 'You're not old enough to understand, dear,' and, 'Wait till you grow up, darling, and then you'll understand.' I used to wonder what the secret was they were keeping from me and I'd listen behind doors to try and see if I couldn't find out."

"Born to be a detective!"

"*Shush.* But I could see that, whatever it was, it didn't make the grown-ups happy; it made 'em sad. Then I used to pray never to find out." She gave a little shrug. "I guess I never did."

He chuckled. "Me neither. A professional Peter Pan, that's me. Just as happy as if I had good sense."

She placed a small gloved hand on his arm. "Don't laugh, Teddy. That's what scares me about this Hoag case. I'm afraid that if we go ahead with it we really will find out what it is the grown-ups know. And then we'll never laugh again."

He started to laugh, then looked at her hard. "Why, you're really serious, aren't you? He chucked her under the chin. "Be your age, kid. What you need is dinner—and a drink."

IV.

After dinner, Cynthia was just composing in her mind what she would say to Mr. Hoag on telephoning him when the house buzzer rang. She went to the entrance of their apartment and took up the house phone. "Yes?"

Almost immediately she turned to her husband and voicelessly shaped the words, "It's Mr. Hoag." He raised his brows, put a cautioning finger to his lips, and with an exaggerated tiptoe started for the bedroom. She nodded.

"Just a moment, please. There—that's better. We seem to have had a bad connection. Now who is it, please?

"Oh . . . Mr. Hoag. Come up, Mr. Hoag." She punched the button controlling the electrical outer lock.

He came in bobbing nervously. "I trust this is not an intrusion, but I have been so upset that I felt I couldn't wait for a report."

She did not invite him to sit down. "I am sorry," she said sweetly, "to have to disappoint you. Mr. Randall has not yet come home."

"Oh." He seemed pathetically disappointed, so much so that she felt a sudden sympathy. Then she remembered what her husband had been put through that morning and froze up again.

"Do you know," he continued, "when he will be home?"

"That I couldn't say. Wives of detectives, Mr. Hoag, learn not to wait up."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, I presume I should not impose on you further. But I *am* anxious to speak with him."

"I'll tell him so. Was there anything in particular you had to say to him? Some new data, perhaps?"

"No—" he said slowly. "No, I suppose . . . it all seems so silly!"

"What does, Mr. Hoag?"

He searched her face. "I wonder— Mrs. Randall, do you believe in possession?"

"Possession?"

"Possession of human souls—by devils."

"I can't say that I've thought much about it," she answered cautiously. She wondered if Teddy were listening, if he could reach her quickly if she screamed.

Hoag was fumbling strangely at his shirt front; he got a button opened; she whiffed an acrid, unclean smell, then he was holding out something in his hand, something fastened by a string around his neck under his shirt.

She forced herself to look at it and with in-

tense relief recognized it for what it was—a cluster of fresh cloves of garlic, worn as a necklace. "Why do you wear it?" she asked.

"It does seem silly, doesn't it?" he admitted. "Giving way to superstition like that—but it comforts me. I've had the most frightening feeling of being watched—"

"Naturally. We've been— Mr. Randall has been watching you, by your instructions."

"Not that. A man in a mirror—" He hesitated.

"A man and a mirror?"

"Your reflection in a mirror watches you, but you expect it; it doesn't worry you. This is something new, as if someone were trying to get at me, waiting for a chance. Do you think I'm crazy?" he concluded suddenly.

Her attention was only half on his words, for she had noticed something when he held out the garlic which had held her attention. His fingertips were ridged and grooved in whorls and loops and arches like anyone else's—and they were certainly not coated with collodion tonight. She decided to get a set of prints for Teddy. "No, I don't think you're crazy," she said soothingly, "but I think you've let yourself worry too much. You should relax. Wouldn't you like a drink?"

"I would be grateful for a glass of water."

Water or liquor, it was the glass she was interested in. She excused herself and went out to the kitchen where she selected a tall glass with smooth, undecorated sides. She polished it carefully, added ice and water with equal care not to wet the sides. She carried it in, holding it near the bottom.

Intentionally or unintentionally, he had outmaneuvered her. He was standing in front of the mirror near the door, where he had evidently been straightening his tie and tidying himself after returning the garlic to its hide-away. When he turned around at her appraoch she saw that he had put his gloves back on.

She invited him to sit down, thinking that if he did so he would remove his gloves. But he said, "I've imposed on you too long as it is." He drank half the glass of water, thanked her, and left silently.

Randall came in. "He's gone?"

She turned quickly. "Yes, he's gone. Teddy, I wish you would do your own dirty work. He makes me nervous. I wanted to scream for you to come in."

"Steady, old girl."

"That's all very well, but I wish we had never laid eyes on him." She went to a window and opened it wide.

"Too late for Herpicide. We're in it now." His eye rested on the glass. "Say—did you get his prints?"

"No such luck. I think he read my mind."

"Too bad."

"Teddy, what do you intend to do about him now?"

"I've got an idea, but let me work it out first. What was this song and dance he was giving you about devils and a man in a mirror watching him?"

"That wasn't what he said."

"Maybe I was the man in the mirror. I watched him in one this morning."

"Huh-uh. He was just using a metaphor. He's got the jumps." She turned suddenly, thinking that she had seen something move over her shoulder. But there was nothing there but the furniture and the wall. Probably just a reflection in the glass, she decided, and said nothing about it. "I've got 'em, too," she added. "As for devils, he's all the devil I want. You know what I'd like?"

"What?"

"A big, stiff drink and early to bed."

"Good idea." He wandered out into the kitchen and started mixing the prescription. "Want a sandwich, too?"

Randall found himself standing in his pajamas in the living room of their apartment, facing the mirror that hung near the outer door. His reflection—no, not his reflection, for the image was properly dressed in conservative clothes appropriate to a solid man of business—the image spoke to him.

"Edward Randall."

"Huh?"

"Edward Randall, you are summoned. Here—take my hand. Pull up a chair and you will find you can climb through easily."

It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do, in fact the only reasonable thing to do. He placed a straight chair under the mirror, took the hand offered him, and scrambled through. There was a washstand under the mirror on the far side, which gave him a leg down. He and his companion were standing in a small, white-tiled washroom such as one finds in office suites.

"Hurry," said his companion. "The others are all assembled."

"Who are you?"

"The name is Phipps," the other said, with a slight bow. "This way, please."

He opened the door of the washroom and gave Randall a gentle shove. He found himself in a room that was obviously a board room—with a meeting in session, for the long table was surrounded by about a dozen men. They all had their eyes on him.

"Up you go, Mr. Randall."

Another shove, not quite so gentle and he was sitting in the middle of the polished table. Its

hard top felt cold through the thin cotton of his pajama trousers.

He drew the jacket around him tightly and shivered. "Cut it out," he said. "Let me down from here. I'm not dressed." He tried to get up, but he seemed unable to accomplish that simple movement.

Somebody behind him chuckled. A voice said, "He's not very fat." Someone answered, "That doesn't matter, for this job."

He was beginning to recognize the situation —the last time it had been Michigan Boulevard without his trousers. More than once it had found him back in school again, not only undressed, but lessons unprepared, and late in the bargain. Well, he knew how to beat it—close your eyes and reach down for the covers, then wake up safe in bed.

He closed his eyes.

"No use to hide, Mr. Randall. We can see you and you are simply wasting time."

He opened his eyes. "What's the idea?" he said savagely. "Where am I? Why'dju bring me here? What's going on?"

Facing him at the head of the table was a large man. Standing, he must have measured six feet two at least, and he was broad-shouldered and heavy-boned in proportion. Fat was laid over his huge frame liberally. But his hands were slender and well shaped and beautifully manicured; his features were not large and seemed smaller, being framed in fat jowls and extra chins. His eyes were small and merry; his mouth smiled a good deal and he had a trick of compressing his lips and shoving them out.

"One thing at a time, Mr. Randall," he answered jovially. "As to where you are, this is the thirteenth floor of the Acme Building—you remember." He chuckled, as if they shared a private joke. "As to what goes on, this is a meeting of the board of Detheridge & Co. I"—he managed to bow sitting down, over the broad expanse of his belly—"am R. Jefferson Stoles, chairman of the board, at your service, sir."

"But—"

"Please, Mr. Randall—introductions first. On my right, Mr. Townsend."

"How do you do, Mr. Randall."

"How do you do," Randall answered mechanically. "Look here, this has gone far—"

"Then Mr. Gravesby, Mr. Wells, Mr. Yoakum, Mr. Printemps, Mr. Jones. Mr. Phipps you have met. He is our secretary. Beyond him is seated Mr. Reifsnider and Mr. Snyder—no relation. And finally Mr. Parker and Mr. Crewes. Mr. Potiphar, I am sorry to say, could not attend, but we have a quorum."

Randall tried to get up again, but the table top seemed unbelievably slippery. "I don't care," he said bitterly, "whether you have a quorum or a gang fight. Let me out of here."

"*Tut,* Mr Randall. *Tut.* Don't you want your questions answered?"

"Not that bad. Damn it, let me—"

"But they really must be answered. This is a

business session and you are the business at hand."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You are, shall we say, a minor item on the agenda, but one which must be cleared up. We do not like your activity, Mr. Randall. You really must cease it."

Before Randall could answer, Stoles shoved a palm in his direction. "Don't be hasty, Mr. Randall. Let me explain. Not all of your activities. We do not care how many blondes you plant in hotel rooms to act as complacent corespondents in divorce cases, nor how many wires you tap, nor letters you open. There is only one activity of yours we are concerned with. I refer to Mr. Hoag." He spat out the last word.

Randall could feel a stir of uneasiness run through the room.

"What about Mr. Hoag?" he demanded. There was the stir again. Stoles' face no longer even pretended to smile.

"Let us refer to him hereafter," he said, "as 'your client.' It comes to this, Mr. Randall. We have other plans for Mr. . . . for your client. You must leave him alone. You must forget him, you must never see him again."

Randall stared back, uncowed. "I've never welshed on a client yet. I'll see you in hell first."

"That," admitted Stoles, shoving out his lips, "is a distinct possibility, I grant you, but one that neither you nor I would care to contemplate, save as a bombastic metaphor. Let us be reasonable. You *are* a reasonable man, I know, and my confreres and I, we are reasonable creatures, too. Instead of trying to coerce or cajole you I want to tell you a story, so that you may understand why."

"I don't care to listen to any stories. I'm leaving."

"Are you really? I think not. And you will listen!"

He pointed a finger at Randall; Randall attempted to reply, found that he could not. "This," he thought, "is the damnedest no-pants dream I ever had. Shouldn't eat before going to bed—knew better."

"In the Beginning," Stoles stated, "there was the Bird." He suddenly covered his face with his hands; all the others gathered around the table did likewise.

The Bird—Randall felt a sudden vision of what those two simple words meant when mouthed by this repulsive fat man; no soft and downy chick, but a bird of prey, strong-winged and rapacious—unwinking eyes, whey-colored and staring—purple wattles—but most especially he saw its feet, bird feet, covered with yellow scales, fleshless and taloned and foul from use. Obscene and terrible—

Stoles uncovered his face. "The Bird was alone. Its great wings beat the empty depths of space where there was none to see. But deep within It was the Power and the Power was Life. It looked to the north when there was no north; It looked to the south when there was no south; east and west It looked, and up and down. Then out of the nothingness and out of Its Will It wove the nest.

"The nest was broad and deep and strong. In the nest It laid one hundred eggs. It stayed on the nest and brooded the eggs, thinking Its thoughts, for ten thousand thousand years. When the time was ripe It left the nest and hung it about with lights that the fledglings might see. It watched and waited.

"From each of the hundred eggs a hundred Sons of the Bird were hatched—ten thousand strong. Yet so wide and deep was the nest there was room and to spare for each of them—a kingdom apiece and each was a king—king over the things that creep and crawl and swim and fly and go on all fours, things that had been born from the crevices of the nest, out of the warmth and the waiting.

"Wise and cruel was the Bird, and wise and cruel were the Sons of the Bird. For twice ten thousand thousand years they fought and ruled and the Bird was pleased. Then there were some who decided that they were as wise and strong as the Bird Itself. Out of the stuff of the nest they created creatures like unto themselves and breathed in their nostrils, that they might have sons to serve them and fight for them. But the sons of the Sons were not wise and strong and cruel, but weak and soft and stupid. The Bird was not pleased.

"Down It cast Its Own Sons and let them be chained by the softly stupid— Stop fidgeting, Mr. Randall! I know this is difficult for your little mind, but for once you really must think about something longer than your nose and wider than your mouth, believe me!

"The stupid and the weak could not hold the Sons of the Bird; therefore, the Bird placed among them, here and there, others more powerful, more cruel, and more shrewd, who by craft and cruelty and deceit could circumvent the attempts of the Sons to break free. Then the Bird sat back, well content, and waited for the game to play itself out.

"The game is being played. Therefore, we cannot permit you to interfere with your client, nor to assist him in any way. You see that, don't you?"

"I don't see," shouted Randall, suddenly able to speak, "a damn thing! To hell with the bunch of you! This joke has gone far enough."

"Silly and weak and stupid," Stoles sighed. "Show him, Mr. Phipps."

Phipps got up, placed a brief case on the table,

opened it, and drew something from it, which he shoved under Randall's nose—a mirror.

"Please look this way, Mr. Randall," he said politely.

Randall looked at himself in the mirror.

"What are you thinking of, Mr. Randall?"

The image faded, he found himself staring into his own bedroom, as if from a slight height. The room was dark, but he could plainly see his wife's head on her pillow. His own pillow was vacant.

She stirred, and half turned over, sighing softly. Her lips were parted a trifle and smiling faintly, as if what she dreamed were pleasant.

"See, Mr. Randall?" said Stoles. "You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, now, would you?"

"Why, you dirty, low-down—"

"Softly, Mr. Randall, softly. And that will be enough from you. Remember your own interests —and *hers.*" Stoles turned away from him. "Remove him, Mr. Phipps."

"Come, Mr. Randall." He felt again that undignified shove from behind, then he was flying through the air with the scene tumbling to pieces around him.

He was wide-awake in his own bed, flat on his back and covered with cold sweat.

Cynthia sat up. "What's the matter, Teddy?" she said sleepily. "I heard you cry out."

"Nothing. Bad dream, I guess. Sorry I woke you."

"'S all right. Stomach upset?"

"A little, maybe."

"Take some bicarb."

"I will." He got up, went to the kitchen and fixed himself a small dose. His mouth was a little sour, he realized, now that he was awake; the soda helped matters.

Cynthia was already asleep when he got back; he slid into bed quietly. She snuggled up to him without waking, her body warming his. Quickly he was asleep, too.

"'Never mind trouble! Fiddle-de-dee!'" He broke off singing suddenly, turned the shower down sufficiently to permit ordinary conversation, and said, "Good morning, beautiful!"

Cynthia was standing in the door of the bathroom, rubbing one eye and looking blearily at him with the other. "People who sing before breakfast—good morning."

"Why shouldn't I sing? It's a beautiful day and I've had a beautiful sleep. I've got a new shower song. Listen."

"Don't bother."

"This is a song," he continued, unperturbed, "dedicated to a Young Man Who Has Announced His Intention of Going Out into the Garden to Eat Worms."

"Teddy, you're nasty."

"No, I'm not. Listen." He turned the shower on more fully. "You have to have the water running to get the full effect," he explained. "First verse:

> "I don't think I'll go out in the *garden;*
> I'll make the worms come in to *me!*
> If I have to be miser'*ble,*
> I might as well be so comfort'*bly!*"

He paused for effect. "Chorus," he announced.

> "Never mind trouble! Fiddle-de-dee!
> Eat your worms with Vitamin B!
> Follow this rule and you will be
> Still eating worms at a hundred 'n' three!"

He paused again. "Second verse," he stated. "Only I haven't thought up a second verse yet. Shall I repeat the first verse?"

"No, thanks. Just duck out of that shower and give me a chance at it."

"You don't like it," he accused her.

"I didn't say I didn't."

"Art is rarely appreciated," he mourned. But he got out.

He had the coffee and the orange juice waiting by the time she appeared in the kitchen. He handed her a glass of the fruit juice. "Teddy, you're a darling. What do you want in exchange for all this coddling?"

"You. But not now. I'm not only sweet, I'm brainy."

"So?"

"Uh-huh. Look— I've figured out what to do with friend Hoag."

"Hoag? Oh, dear!"

"Look out—you'll spill it!" He took the glass from her and set it down. "Don't be silly, babe. What's gotten into you?"

"I don't know, Teddy. I just feel as if we were tackling the kingpin of Cicero with a pea shooter."

"I shouldn't have talked business before breakfast. Have your coffee—you'll feel better."

"All right. No toast for me, Teddy. What's your brilliant idea?"

"It's this," he explained, while crunching toast. "Yesterday we tried to keep out of his sight in order not to shake him back into his nighttime personality. Right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, today we don't have to. We can stick to him like a leech, both of us, practically arm in arm. If it interferes with the daytime half of his personality, it doesn't matter, because we can lead him to the Acme Building. Once there, habit will take him where he usually goes. Am I right?"

"I don't know, Teddy. Maybe. Amnesia personalities are funny things. He might just drift into a confused state."

"You don't think it will work?"

"Maybe it will, maybe it won't. But as long as you plan for us to stay close together, I'm willing to try it—if you won't give up the whole matter."

He ignored the condition she placed on it. "Fine. I'll give the old buzzard a ring and tell him to wait for us at his apartment." He reached across the breakfast table and grabbed the phone, dialed it and talked briefly with Hoag. "He's certainly a June bug, that one," he said as he put the phone down. "At first he couldn't place me at all. Then all of a sudden he seemed to click and everything was all right. Ready to go, Cyn?"

"Half a sec."

"O. K." He got up and went into the living room, whistling softly.

The whistling broke off; he came quickly back into the kitchen. "Cyn—"

"What's the matter, Teddy?"

"Come into the living room—please!"

She hurried to do so, suddenly apprehensive at the sight of his face. He pointed to a straight chair which had been pulled over to a point directly under the mirror near the outer door. "Cyn—how did that get where it is?"

"That chair? Why, I pulled a chair over there to straighten the mirror just before I went to bed. I must have left it there."

"Mm-m-m— I suppose you must have. Funny I didn't notice it when I turned out the light."

"Why does it worry you? Think somebody might have gotten into the apartment last night?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure—that's what I was thinking." But his brow was still wrinkled.

Cynthia looked at him, then went back into the bedroom. There she gathered up her purse, went through it rapidly, then opened a small, concealed drawer in her dressing table. "If anyone *did* manage to get in, they didn't get much. Got your wallet? Everything in it? How about your watch?"

He made a quick check and reported, "They're all right. You must have left the chair there and I just didn't notice it. Ready to go?"

"Be right with you."

He said no more about it. Privately he was thinking what an involved mess a few subconscious memories and a club sandwich just before turning in could make. He must have noticed the chair just before turning out the light—hence its appearance in the nightmare. He dismissed the matter.

V.

Hoag was waiting for them. "Come in," he said. "Come in. Welcome, madame, to my little hide-away. Will you sit down? Have we time for a cup of tea? I'm afraid," he added apologetically, "that I haven't coffee in the house."

"I guess we have," agreed Randall. "Yesterday you left the house at eight fifty-three and it's only eight thirty-five now. I think we ought to leave at the same time."

"Good." Hoag bustled away, to return at once with a tea service on a tray, which he placed on a table at Cynthia's knees. "Will you pour, Mrs. Randall? It's Chinese tea," he added. "My own blend."

"I'd be pleased." He did not look at all sinister this morning, she was forced to admit. He was just a fussy little bachelor with worry lines around his eyes—and a most exquisite apartment. His pictures were good, just how good she had not the training to tell, but they looked like originals. There were not too many of them, either, she noticed with approval. Arty little bachelors were usually worse than old maids for crowding a room full of too much.

Not Mr. Hoag's flat. It had an airy perfection to it as pleasing, in its way, as a Brahms waltz. She wanted to ask him where he had gotten his drapes.

He accepted a cup of tea from her, cradled it in his hand and sniffed the aroma before sipping from it. He then turned to Randall. "I am afraid, sir, that we are off on a wild-goose chase this morning."

"Perhaps. Why do you think so?"

"Well, you see, I really am at a loss as to what to do next. You telephone call— I was preparing my morning tea—I don't keep a servant—as usual, when you called. I suppose I am more or less in a brown fog in the early mornings—absent-minded, you know, just doing the things one does when one gets up, making one's toilet and all that with one's thoughts elsewhere. When you telephoned I was quite bemused and it took me a moment to recall who you were and what business we had with each other. In a way the conversation cleared my head, made me consciously aware of myself, that is to say, but now—" He shrugged helplessly. "Now I haven't the slightest idea of what I am to do next."

Randall nodded. "I had that possibility in mind when I phoned you. I don't claim to be a psychologist but it seemed possible that your transition from your nighttime self to your daytime self took place as you left your apartment and that any interruption in your routine might throw you off."

"Then why—"

"It won't matter. You see, we shadowed you yesterday; we know where you go."

"You *do?* Tell me, sir! Tell me."

"Not so fast. We lost track of you at the last minute. What I had in mind is this: We could guide you along the same track, right up to the point where we lost track of you yesterday. At

that point I am hoping that your habitual routine will carry you on through—and we will be right at your heels."

"You say 'we.' Does Mrs. Randall assist you in this?"

Randall hesitated, realizing that he had been caught out in a slight prevarication. Cynthia moved in and took over the ball.

"Not ordinarily, Mr. Hoag, but this seemed like an exceptional case. We felt that you would not enjoy having your private affairs looked into by the ordinary run of hired operator, so Mr. Randall has undertaken to attend to your case personally, with my help when necessary."

"Oh, I say, that's awfully kind of you!"

"Not at all."

"But it is—it is. But, uh, in that case—I wonder if I have paid you enough. Do not the services of the head of the firm come a little higher?"

Hoag was looking at Cynthia; Randall signaled to her an emphatic "Yes"—which she chose to ignore. "What you have already paid, Mr. Hoag, seems sufficient. If additional involvements come up later, we can discuss them then."

"I suppose so." He paused and pulled at his lower lip. "I do appreciate your thoughtfulness in keeping my affairs to yourselves. I shouldn't like—" He turned suddenly to Randall. "Tell me—what would your attitude be if it should develop that my daytime life is—scandalous?" The word seemed to hurt him.

"I can keep scandal to myself."

"Suppose it were worse than that. Suppose it were—criminal. Beastly."

Randall stopped to choose his words. "I am licensed by the State of Illinois. Under that license I am obliged to regard myself as a special police officer in a limited sense. I certainly could not cover up any major felony. But it's not my business to turn clients in for any ordinary peccadillo. I can assure you that it would have to be something pretty serious for me to be willing to turn over a client to the police."

"But you can't assure me that you would *not* do so?"

"No," he said flatly.

Hoag sighed. "I suppose I'll just have to trust to your good judgment." He held up his right hand and looked at his nails. "No. No, I can't risk it. Mr. Randall, suppose you did find something you did not approve of—couldn't you just call me up and tell me that you were dropping the case?"

"No."

He covered his eyes and did not answer at once. When he did his voice was barely audible. "You've found nothing—yet?" Randall shook his head. "Then perhaps it is wiser to drop the matter now. Some things are better never known."

His evident distress and helplessness, combined with the favorable impression his apartment had made on her, aroused in Cynthia a sympathy which she would have thought impossible the evening before. She leaned toward him. "Why should you be so distressed, Mr. Hoag? You have no reason to think that you have done anything to be afraid of—have you?"

"No. No, nothing really. Nothing but an overpowering apprehension."

"But why?"

"Mrs. Randall, have you ever heard a noise behind you and been afraid to look around? Have you ever awakened in the night and kept your eyes tightly shut rather than find out what it was that had startled you? Some evils reach their full effect only when acknowledged and faced.

"I don't dare face this one," he added. "I thought that I did, but I was mistaken."

"Come now," she said kindly, "facts are never as bad as our fears—"

"Why do you say so? Why shouldn't they be much worse?"

"Why, because they just aren't." She stopped, suddenly conscious that her Pollyanna saying had no truth in it, that it was the sort of thing adults use to pacify children. She thought of her own mother, who had gone to the hospital, fearing an appendectomy—which her friends and loving family privately diagnosed as hypochondria—there to *die,* of cancer.

No, the facts were frequently worse than our most nervous fears.

Still, she could not agree with him. "Suppose we look at it in the worst possible light," she suggested. "Suppose you *have* been doing something criminal, while in your memory lapses. No court in the State would hold you legally responsible for your actions."

He looked at her wildly. "No. No, perhaps they would not. But you know what they would do? You do, don't you? Have you any idea what they do with the criminally insane?"

"I certainly do," she answered positively. "They receive the same treatment as any other psycho patient. They aren't discriminated against. I know; I've done field work at the State Hospital."

"Suppose you have—you looked at it from the *outside.* Have you any idea what it feels like from the inside? Have you ever been placed in a wet pack? Have you ever had a guard put you to bed? Or force you to eat? Do you know what it's like to have a key turned in a lock every time you make a move? Never to have *any* privacy no matter how much you need it?"

He got up and began to pace. "But that isn't

the worst of it. It's the other patients. Do you imagine that a man, simply because his own mind is playing him tricks, doesn't recognize insanity in others? Some of them drool and some of them have habits too beastly to tell of. And they talk, they talk, they *talk*. Can you imagine lying in a bed, with the sheet bound down, and a *thing* in the next bed that keeps repeating, 'The little bird flew up and then flew away; the little bird flew up and then flew away; the little bird flew up and then flew away—'"

"Mr. Hoag!" Randall stood up and took him by the arm. "Mr. Hoag—control yourself! That's no way to behave."

Hoag stopped, looking bewildered. He looked from one face to the other and an expression of shame came over him. "I . . . I'm sorry, Mrs. Randall," he said. "I quite forgot myself. I'm not myself today. All this worry—"

"It's all right, Mr. Hoag," she said stiffly. But her earlier revulsion had returned.

"It's not entirely all right," Randall amended. "I think the time has come to get a number of things cleared up. There has been entirely too much going on that I don't understand and I think it is up to you, Mr. Hoag, to give me a few plain answers."

The little man seemed honestly at a loss. "I surely will, Mr. Randall, if there is anything I can answer. Do you feel that I have not been frank with you?"

"I certainly do. First—when were you in a hospital for the criminally insane?"

"Why, I never was. At least, I don't *think* I ever was. I don't remember being in one."

"Then why all this hysterical balderdash you have been spouting the past five minutes? Were you just making it up?"

"Oh, no! That . . . that was . . . that referred to St. George Rest Home. It had nothing to do with a . . . with such a hospital."

"St. George Rest Home, eh? We'll come back to that. Mr. Hoag, tell me what happened yesterday."

"Yesterday? During the day? But Mr. Randall, you *know* I can't tell you what happened during the day."

"*I* think you can. There has been some damnable skulduggery going on and you're the center of it. When you stopped me in front of the Acme Building—*what did you say to me?*"

"The Acme Building? I know nothing of the Acme Building. Was I there?"

"You're damned right you were there and you pulled some sort of a shenanigan on me, drugged me or doped me, or something. *Why?*"

Hoag looked from Randall's implacable face to that of his wife. But her face was impassive; she was having none of it. He turned hopelessly back to Randall. "Mr. Randall, believe me—I don't know what you are talking about. I may have been at the Acme Building. If I were and if I did anything to you, I know nothing of it."

His words were so grave, so solemnly sincere in their sound that Randall was unsettled in his own conviction. And yet—damn it, *somebody* had led him up an alley. He shifted his approach. "Mr. Hoag, if you have been as sincere with me as you claim to be, you won't mind what I'm going to do next." He drew from the inner pocket of his coat a silver cigarette case, opened it, and polished the mirrorlike inner surface of the cover with his handkerchief. "Now, Mr. Hoag, if you please."

"What do you want?"

"I want your fingerprints."

Hoag looked startled, swallowed a couple of times, and said in a low voice, "Why should you want my fingerprints?"

"Why not? If you haven't done anything, it can't do any harm, can it?"

"You're going to turn me over to the police!"

"I haven't any reason to. I haven't anything on you. Let's have your prints."

"No!"

Randall got up, stepped toward Hoag and stood over him. "How would you like both your arms broken?" he said savagely.

Hoag looked at him and cringed, but he did not offer his hands for prints. He huddled himself together, face averted and his hands drawn in tight to his chest.

Randall felt a touch on his arm. "That's enough, Teddy. Let's get out of here."

Hoag looked up. "Yes," he said huskily. "Get out. Don't come back."

"Come on, Teddy."

"I will in a moment. I'm not quite through. Mr. Hoag!"

Hoag met his eye as if it were a major effort.

"Mr. Hoag, you've mentioned St. George Rest Home twice as being your old *alma mater*. I just wanted you to know that *I* know that there is no such place!"

Again Hoag looked genuinely startled. "But there is," he insisted. "Wasn't I there for— At least they told me that was its name," he added doubtfully.

"Humph!" Randall turned toward the door. "Come on, Cynthia."

Once they were alone in the elevator she turned to him. "How did you happen to play it that way, Teddy?"

"Because," he said bitterly, "while I don't mind opposition, it makes me sore when my own client crosses me up. He dished us a bunch of lies, and obstructed us, and pulled some kind of sleight of

hand on me in that Acme Building deal. I don't like for a client to pull stunts like that; I don't need their money that bad."

"Well," she sighed, "I, for one, will be very happy to give it back to him. I'm glad it's over."

"What do you mean, 'give it back to him'? I'm not going to give it back to him; I'm going to earn it."

The car had arrived at the ground floor by now, but she did not touch the gate. "Teddy! What do you mean?"

"He hired me to find out what he does. Well, damn it, I'm going to *find* out—with or without his co-operation."

He waited for her to answer, but she did not. "Well," he said defensively, "you don't have to have anything to do with it."

"If you are going on with it, I certainly am. Remember what you promised me?"

"What did I promise?" he asked, with a manner of complete innocence.

"*You* know."

"But look here, Cyn—all I'm going to do is to hang around until he comes out, and then tail him. It may take all day. He may decide not to come out."

"All right. I'll wait with you."

"Somebody has to look out for the office."

"You look out for the office," she suggested. "I'll shadow Hoag."

"Now that's ridiculous. You—" The car started to move upward. "Woops! Somebody wants to use it." He jabbed the button marked "Stop," then pushed the one which returned the car to the ground floor. This time they did not wait inside; he immediately opened the gate and the door.

Adjacent to the entrance of the apartment house was a little lounge or waiting room. He guided her into it. "Now let's get this settled," he commenced.

"It *is* settled."

"O. K., you win. Let's get ourselves staked out."

"How about right here? We can sit down and he can't possibly get out without us seeing him."

"O. K."

The elevator had gone up immediately after they had quitted it; soon they heard the typical clanging grunt which announced its return to the ground floor. "On your toes, kid."

She nodded and drew back into the shadows of the lounge. He placed himself so that he could see the elevator door by reflection in an ornamental mirror hanging in the lounge. "Is it Hoag?" she whispered.

"No," he answered in a low voice, "it's a bigger man. It looks like—" He shut up suddenly and grabbed her wrist.

Past the open door of the lounge she saw the hurrying form of Jonathan Hoag go by. The figure did not turn its eyes in their direction but went directly through the outer door. When it swung closed Randall relaxed the hold on her wrist. "I darn near muffed that one," he admitted.

"What happened?"

"Don' know. Bum glass in the mirror. Distortion. Tallyho, kid."

They reached the door as their quarry got to the sidewalk and, as on the day before, turned to the left.

Randall paused uncertainly. "I think we'll take a chance on him seeing us. I don't want to lose him."

"Couldn't we follow him just as effectively in a cab? If he gets on a bus where he did before, we'll be better off than we would be trying to get on it with him." She did not admit, even to herself, that she was trying to keep them away from Hoag.

"No, he might not take a bus. Come on."

They had no difficulty in following him; he was heading down the street at a brisk, but not a difficult, pace. When he came to the bus stop where he had gotten on the day before, he purchased a paper and sat down on the bench. Randall and Cynthia passed behind him and took shelter in a shop entrance.

When the bus came he went up to the second deck as before; they got on and remained on the lower level. "Looks like he was going right where he went yesterday," Randall commented. "We'll get him today, kid."

She did not answer.

When the bus approached the stop near the Acme Building they were ready and waiting—but Hoag failed to come down the steps. The bus started up again with a jerk; they sat back down. "What do you suppose he is up to?" Randall fretted. "Do you suppose he saw us?"

"Maybe he gave us the slip," Cynthia suggested hopefully.

"How? By jumping off the top of the bus? Hm-m-m!"

"Not quite, but you're close. If another bus pulled alongside us at a stop light, he could have done it by stepping across, over the railing. I saw a man do that once. If you do it toward the rear, you stand a good chance of getting away with it entirely."

He considered the matter. "I'm pretty sure no bus has pulled up by us. Still, he could do it to the top of a truck, too, though Lord knows how he would get off again." He fidgeted. "Tell you what—I'm going back to the stairs and sneak a look."

"And meet him coming down? Be your age, Brain."

He subsided; the bus went on a few blocks.

"Coming to our own corner," he remarked.

She nodded, naturally having noticed as soon as he did that they were approaching the corner nearest the building in which their own office was located. She took out her compact and powdered her nose, a routine she had followed eight times since getting on the bus. The little mirror made a handy periscope whereby to watch the passengers getting off the rear of the bus. "There he is, Teddy!"

Randall was up out of his seat at once and hurrying down the aisle, waving at the conductor. The conductor looked annoyed but signaled the driver not to start. "Why don't you watch the streets?" he asked.

"Sorry, buddy. I'm a stranger here myself. Come on, Cyn."

Their man was just turning into the door of the building housing their own office. Randall stopped. "Something screwy about this, kid."

"What do we do?"

"Follow him," he decided.

They hurried on; he was not in the lobby. The Midway-Copton is not a large building, nor swank—else they could not have rented there. It has but two elevators. One was down and empty; the other, by the indicator, had just started up.

Randall stepped up to the open car, but did not enter. "Jimmie," he said, "how many passengers in that other car?"

"Two," the elevator pilot answered.

"Sure?"

"Yeah. I was breezin' with Bert when he closed the door. Mr. Harrison and another bird. Why?"

Randall passed him a quarter. "Never mind," he said, his eyes on the slowly turning arrow of the indicator. "What floor does Mr. Harrison go to?"

"Seven." The arrow had just stopped at seven.

"Swell." The arrow started up again, moved slowly past eight and nine, stopped at ten. Randall hustled Cynthia into the car. "Our floor, Jimmie," he snapped, "and step on it!"

An "up" signal flashed from the fourth floor; Jimmie reached for his controls; Randall grabbed his arm. "Skip it this time, Jim."

The operator shrugged and complied with the request.

The corridor facing the elevators on the tenth floor was empty. Randall saw this at once and turned to Cynthia. "Give a quick gander down the other wing, Cyn," he said, and headed to the right, in the direction of their office.

Cynthia did so, with no particular apprehension. She was sure in her own mind that, having come this far, Hoag was certainly heading for their office. But she was in the habit of taking direction from Teddy when they were actually doing something; if he wanted the other corridor looked at, she would obey, of course.

The floor plan was in the shape of a capital H, with the elevators located centrally on the cross bar. She turned to the left to reach the other wing, then glanced to the left—no one in that alley. She turned around and faced the other way—no one down there. It occurred to her that just possibly Hoag could have stepped out on the fire escape; as a matter of fact the fire escape was in the direction she had first looked, toward the rear of the building—but habit played a trick on her; she was used to the other wing in which their office was located, in which, naturally, everything was swapped right for left from the way

in which it was laid out in this wing.

She had taken three or four steps toward the end of the corridor facing the street when she realized her mistake—the open window certainly had no fire escape beyond it. With a little exclamation of impatience at her own stupidity she turned back.

Hoag was standing just behind her.

She gave a most unprofessional squeak.

Hoag smiled with his lips. "Ah, Mrs. Randall!"

She said nothing—she could think of nothing to say. There was a .32 pistol in her handbag; she felt a wild desire to snatch it out and fire. On two occasions, at a time when she was working as a decoy for the narcotics squad, she had been commended officially for her calm courage in a dangerous pinch—she felt no such calm now.

He took a step toward her. "You wanted to see me, did you not?"

She gave way a step. "No," she said breathlessly. "No!"

"Ah, but you did. You expected to find me at your office, but I chose to meet you—here!"

The corridor was deserted; she could not even hear a sound of typing or conversation from any of the offices around them. The glazed doors stared sightlessly; the only sounds, other than their own sparse words, were the street noises ten stories below, muted, remote and unhelpful.

He came closer. "You wanted to take my fingerprints, didn't you? You wanted to check them —find out things about me. You and your meddlesome husband."

"Get away from me!"

He continued to smile. "Come, now. You wanted my fingerprints—you shall have them." He raised his arms toward her and spread his fingers, reaching. She backed away from the clutching hands. He no longer seemed small; he seemed taller, and broader—bigger than Teddy. His eyes stared down at her.

Her heel struck something behind her; she knew that she had backed to the very end of the passage—dead end.

His hands came closer. "Teddy!" she screamed. "Oh, Teddy!"

Teddy was bending over her, slapping her face. "Stop that," she said indignantly. "It hurts!"

He gave a sigh of relief. "Gee, honey," he said tenderly. "You sure gave me a turn. You've been out for minutes."

"Unnnh!"

"Do you know where I found you? There!" He pointed to the spot just under the open window. "If you hadn't fallen just right, you would have been hamburger by now. What happened? Lean out and get dizzy?"

"Didn't you catch him?"

He looked at her admiringly. "Always the professional! No, but I damn near did. I saw him, from down the corridor. I watched a moment to see what he was up to. If you hadn't screamed, I would have had him."

"If I *hadn't* screamed?"

"Sure. He was in front of our office door, apparently trying to pick the lock, when—"

"*Who* was?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Why, Hoag, of course— *Baby!* Snap out of it! You aren't going to faint again, are you?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm all right," she said grimly, "—now. Just as long as you're here. Take me to the office."

"Shall I carry you?"

"No, just give me your hand." He helped her up and brushed at her dress. "Never mind that now." But she did stop to moisten, ineffectively, a long run in what had been until that moment brand-new stockings.

He let them into the office and sat her carefully in an armchair, then fetched a wet towel with which he bathed her face. "Feel better?"

"I'm all right—physically. But I want to get something straight. You say you saw Hoag trying to get into this office?"

"Yeah. Damned good thing we've special locks."

"This was going on when I screamed?"

"Yeah, sure."

She drummed on the arms of the chair.

"'S matter, Cyn?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all—only this: The reason I screamed was because Hoag was trying to choke me!"

It took him some time even to say, "Hunh?"

She replied, "Yes, I know, darling. That's how it is and it's nuts. Somehow or other, he's done it to us again. But I swear to you that he was about to choke me. Or I thought he was." She rehearsed her experience, in detail. "What does it add up to?"

"I wish I knew," he told her, rubbing his face. "I wish I did. If it hadn't been for that business in the Acme Building, I would say that you were sick and had fainted and when you came to you were still kinda lightheaded. But now I don't know which one of us is batty. I surely thought I saw him."

"Maybe we're both crazy. It might be a good idea if we both went to see a good phychiatrist."

"Both of us? Can two people go crazy the same way? Wouldn't it be one or the other of us?"

"Not necessarily. It's rare, but it does happen. *Folie à deux.*"

"Folee adooh?"

"Contagious insanity. Their weak points match up and they make each other crazier." She thought of the cases she had studied and recalled that

usually one was dominant and the other subordinate, but she decided not to bring it up, as she had her own opinion as to who was dominant in their family, an opinion kept private for reasons of policy.

"Maybe," Randall said thoughtfully, "what we need is a nice, long rest. Down on the Gulf, maybe, where we could lie around in the sunshine."

"*That,*" she said, "is a good idea in any case. Why in the world anyone chooses to live in a dismal, dirty, ugly spot like Chicago is beyond me."

"How much money have we?"

"About eight hundred dollars, after the bills and taxes are paid. And there's the five hundred from Hoag, if you want to count that."

"I think we've earned it," he said grimly. "Say! *Do* we have that money? Maybe that was a hoax, too."

"You mean maybe there never was any Mr. Hoag and pretty soon the nurse will be in to bring us our nice supper."

"Mm-m-m—that's the general idea. Have you got it?"

"I *think* I have. Wait a minute." She opened her purse, in turn opened a zippered compartment, and felt in it. "Yes, it's here. Pretty green bills. Let's take that vacation, Teddy. I don't know why we stay in Chicago, anyway."

"Because the business is here," he said practically. "Coffee and cakes. Which reminds me, slaphappy or not, I'd better see what calls have come in." He reached across her desk for the phone; his eye fell on a sheet of paper in her typewriter. He was silent for a moment, then said in a strained voice, "Come here, Cyn. Take a look at this."

She got up at once, came around and looked over his shoulder. What she saw was one of their letterheads, rolled into the typewriter; on it was a single line of typing:

CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT.

She said nothing at all and tried to control the quivering at the pit of her stomach.

Randall asked, "Cyn, did you write that?"

"No."

"Positive?"

"Yes." She reached out to take it out of the machine; he checked her.

"Don't touch it. Fingerprints."

"All right. But I have a notion," she said, "that you won't find any fingerprints on *that.*"

"Maybe not."

Nevertheless, he took his outfit out of the lower drawer of his desk and dusted the paper and the machine—with negative results on each. There were not even prints of Cynthia to confuse the matter; she had a business-college neatness in her office habits and made a practice of brushing and wiping her typewriter at the end of each day.

While watching him work she remarked, "Looks as if you saw him getting *out* rather than *in.*"

"Huh? How?"

"Picked the lock, I suppose."

"Not that lock. You forget, baby, that that lock is one of Mr. Yale's proudest achievements. You could break it, maybe, but you couldn't pick it."

She made no answer—she could think of none. He stared moodily at the typewriter as if it should tell him what had happened, then straightened up, gathered up his gear, and returned it to its proper drawer. "The whole thing stinks," he said, and commenced to pace the room.

Cynthia took a rag from her own desk and wiped the print powder from the machine, then sat down and watched him. She held her tongue while he fretted with the matter. Her expression was troubled but she was not worried for herself—nor was it entirely maternal. Rather was she worried for them.

"Cyn," he said suddenly, "this has got to stop!"

"All right," she agreed. "Let's stop it."

"How?"

"Let's take that vacation."

He shook his head. "I can't run away from it. I've got to *know.*"

She sighed. "I'd rather not know. What's wrong with running away from something too big for us to fight?"

He stopped and looked at her. "What's come over you, Cyn? You never went chicken before."

"No," she answered slowly, "I never did. But I never had reason to. Look at me, Teddy—you know I'm not a *female* female. I don't expect you to pick fights in restaurants when some lug tries to pick me up. I don't scream at the sight of blood and I don't expect you to clean up your language to fit my ladylike ears. As for the job, did I ever let you down on a case? Through timidity, I mean. Did I ever?"

"Hell, no. I didn't say you did."

"But this is a different case. I had a gun in my bag a few minutes ago, but I couldn't use it. Don't ask me why. I *couldn't.*"

He swore, with emphasis and considerable detail. "I wish I had seen him then. I would have used mine!"

"Would you have, Teddy?" Seeing his expression, she jumped up and kissed him suddenly, on the end of his nose. "I don't mean you would have been afraid. You know I didn't mean that. You're brave and you're strong and *I* think you're brainy. But look, dear—yesterday he led you around by the nose and made you believe you were seeing things that weren't there. Why didn't you use your gun then?"

"I didn't see any occasion to use it."

"That's exactly what I mean. You saw what was intended for you to see. How can you fight when you can't believe your own eyes?"

"But, damn it, he can't do this to us—"

"Can't he? Here's what he *can* do." She ticked them off on her fingers. "He can be two places at once. He can make you see one thing and me another, at the same time—outside the Acme Building, remember? He can make you think you went to an office suite that doesn't exist on a floor that doesn't exist. He can pass through a locked door to use a typewriter on the other side. And he doesn't leave fingerprints. What does that add up to?"

He made an impatient gesture. "To nonsense. Or to magic. And I don't believe in magic."

"Neither do I."

"Then," he said, "we've both gone bats." He laughed, but it was not merry.

"Maybe. If it's magic, we had best see a priest—"

"I told you I don't believe in magic."

"Skip it. If it's the other, it won't do us any good to try to tail Mr. Hoag. A man with the D. T.'s can't catch the snakes he thinks he sees and take them to a zoo. He needs a doctor—and maybe we do, too."

Randall was suddenly alert. "Say!"

"Say what?"

"You've just reminded me of an angle that I had forgotten—Hoag's doctor. We never checked on *him*."

"Yes, you did, too. Don't you remember? There wasn't any such doctor."

"I don't mean Dr. Rennault; I mean Dr. Potbury—the one he went to see about the stuff under his fingernails."

"Do you think he really did that? I thought it was just part of the string of lies he told us."

"So do I. But we ought to check up on it."

"I'll bet you there isn't any such doctor."

"You're probably right, but we ought to *know*. Gimme the phone book." She handed it to him; he thumbed through it, searching for the P's. "Potbury—Potbury. There's half a column of them. But no M. D.'s, though," he announced presently. "Let's have the yellow section; sometimes doctors don't list their home addresses." She got it for him and he opened it. "'Physical-culture Studios'—'Physicians & Surgeons.' What a slog of 'em! More doctors than saloons—half the town must be sick most of the time. Here we are: 'Potbury, P. T., M. D.'"

"That *could* be the one," she admitted.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go find out."

"Teddy!"

"Why not?" he said defensively. "Potbury isn't Hoag—"

"I wonder."

"Huh? What do you mean? Do you mean that Potbury might be mixed up in this hugger-mugger, too?"

"I don't know. I'd just like to forget all about our Mr. Hoag."

"But there's no harm in this, bright eyes. I'll just pop into the car, slide down there, ask the worthy doctor a few pertinent questions, and be back for you in time for lunch."

"The car is laid up for a valve grind; you know that."

"O. K., I'll take the el. Quicker, anyway."

"If you insist on going, we'll both take the el. We stick together, Teddy."

He pulled at his lip. "Maybe you're right. We don't know where Hoag is. If you prefer it—"

"I certainly do. I got separated from you for just three minutes a little while ago and look what happened."

"Yeah, I guess so. I sure wouldn't want anything to happen to you, kid."

She brushed it away. "It's not me; it's *us*. If anything happens to us, I want it to be the same thing."

"All right," he said seriously. "From now on, we stick together. I'll handcuff us together, if you'd rather."

"You won't need to. I'm going to hang on."

VI.

Potbury's office was to the south, beyond the university. The tracks of the elevated ran between familiar miles of apartment houses. There were sights which one ordinarily sees without any impression registering on the brain; today she looked at them and saw them, through her own brown mood.

Four- and five-story walk-up apartment houses, with their backs to the tracks, at least ten families to a building, more usually twenty or more, and the buildings crushed together almost wall to wall. Wood-construction back porches which proclaimed the fire-trap nature of the warrens despite the outer brick shells, family wash hung out to dry on those porches, garbage cans, and trash bins. Mile after mile of undignified and unbeautiful squalor, seen from the rear.

And over everything a film of black grime, old and inescapable, like the dirt on the window sill beside her.

She thought of that vacation, clean air and clear sunshine. Why stay in Chicago? What did the town have to justify its existence? One decent boulevard, one decent suburb to the north, priced for the rich, two universities and a lake. As for the rest, endless miles of depressing, dirty streets. The town was one big stockyards.

The apartments gave way to elevated-train yards; the train turned left and headed east. After

a few minutes they got off at Stoney Island station; she was glad to be off it and free of that too-frank back view of everyday life, even though she exchanged it for the noise and seedy commercialism of Sixty-third Street.

Potbury's office faced on the street, with an excellent view of the elevated and the trains. It was the sort of location in which a G. P. could be sure of a busy practice and equally sure of never being bothered by riches nor fame. The stuffy little waiting room was crowded but the turnover was fast; they did not have long to wait.

Potbury looked them over as they came in. "Which one of you is the patient?" he asked. His manner was slightly testy.

They had planned to lead up to the subject of Hoag by using Cynthia's fainting spell as an excuse for consultation; Potbury's next remark queered the scheme, from Cynthia's viewpoint. "Whichever one it is, the other can wait outside. I don't like holding conventions."

"My wife—" Randall began. She clutched his arm.

"My wife and I," he went on smoothly, "want to ask you a couple of questions, doctor."

"Well? Speak up."

"You have a patient—a Mr. Hoag."

Potbury got up hastily, went to the reception-room door, and assured himself that it was closed tightly. He then stood and faced them, his back to the only exit. "What about—Hoag?" he said forebodingly.

Randall produced his credentials. "You can see for yourself that I am a proper inquiry agent," he said. "My wife is licensed, too."

"What do you have to do with—the man you mentioned?"

"We are conducting an investigation for him. Being a professional man yourself, you can appreciate that I prefer to be frank—"

"You *work* for him?"

"Yes and no. Specifically, we are trying to find out certain things about him, but he is aware that we are doing so; we aren't going around behind his back. If you like, you can phone him and find out for yourself." Randall made the suggestion because it seemed necessary to make it; he hoped that Potbury would disregard it.

Potbury did so, but not in any reassuring manner. "Talk with *him?* Not if I can help it! What did you want to know about him?"

"A few days ago," Randall said carefully, "Hoag brought to you a substance to be analyzed. I want to find out what that substance was."

"Hrrumph! You reminded me a moment ago that we were both professional men; I am surprised that you should make such a request."

"I appreciate your viewpoint, doctor, and I know that a doctor's knowledge of his patients is privileged. But in this case there is—"

"You wouldn't want to know!"

Randall considered this. "I've seen a good deal of the seamy side of life, doctor, and I don't think there is anything that can shock me any more. Do you hesitate to tell me in Mrs. Randall's presence?"

Potbury looked him over quizzically, then surveyed Mrs. Randall. "You look like decent enough people," he conceded. "I suppose you do think you are beyond being shocked. But let me give you some advice. Apparently you are connected in some way with this man. *Stay away from him!* Don't have anything to do with him. And don't ask me what he had under his fingernails."

Cynthia suppressed a start. She had been keeping out of the conversation but following it carefully. As she remembered it, Teddy had made no mention of fingernails.

"*Why,* doctor?" Randall continued insistently.

Potbury was beginning to be annoyed. "You are a rather stupid young man, sir. Let me tell you this: If you know no more of this person than you appear to know, then you have no conception of the depths of beastliness possible in this world. In that you are lucky. It is much, much better never to know."

Randall hesitated, aware that the debate was going against him. Then he said, "Supposing you are right, doctor—how is it, if he is so vicious, you have not turned Hoag over to the police?"

"How do you know I haven't? But I will answer that one, sir. No, I have not turned him over to the police, for the simple reason that it would do no good. The authorities have not had the wit nor the imagination to conceive of the possibility of the peculiar evil involved. No law can touch him—not in this day and age."

"What do you mean, 'not in this day and age'?"

"Nothing. Disregard it. The subject is closed. You said something about your wife when you came in; did she wish to consult me about something?"

"It was nothing," Cynthia said hastily. "Nothing of importance."

"Just a pretext, eh?" He smiled almost jovially. "What was it?"

"Nothing. I fainted earlier today. But I'm all right now."

"Hm-m-m. You're not expecting, are you? Your eyes don't look like it. You look sound enough. A little anæmic, perhaps. Fresh air and sunshine wouldn't do you any harm." He moved away from them and opened a white cabinet on the far wall; he busied himself with bottle for a moment. Presently he returned with a medicine glass filled with amber-brown liquid. "Here—drink this."

"What is it?"

"A tonic. It contains just enough of What Made the Preacher Dance to make you enjoy it."

Still she hesitated, looking to her husband. Potbury noticed it and remarked, "Don't like to drink alone, eh? Well, one wouldn't do us any harm, either." He returned to the cabinet and came back with two more medicine glasses, one of which he handed to Randall. "Here's to forgetting all unpleasant matters," he said. "Drink up!" He lifted his own glass to his lips and tossed it off.

Randall drank, Cynthia followed suit. It was not bad stuff, she thought. Something a little bitter in it, but the whiskey—it *was* whiskey, she concluded—covered up the taste. A bottle of that tonic might not do you any real good but it would make you feel better.

Potbury ushered them out. "If you have another fainting spell, Mrs. Randall, come back to see me and we'll give you a thorough going over. In the meantime, don't worry about matters you can't help."

They took the last car of the train in returning and were able to pick a seat far away enough from other passengers for them to talk freely. "Whatja make of it?" he asked, as soon as they were seated.

She wrinkled her brow. "I don't know, quite. He certainly doesn't like Mr. Hoag, but he never said why."

"Um-m-m."

"What do you make of it, Teddy?"

"First, Potbury knows Hoag. Second, Potbury is very anxious that we know nothing about Hoag. Third, Potbury hates Hoag—and is afraid of him!"

"Huh? How do you figure that out?"

He smiled maddeningly. "Use the little gray cells, my sweet. I think I'm on to friend Potbury—and if he thinks he can scare me out of looking into what Hoag does with his spare time he's got another think coming!"

Wisely, she decided not to argue it with him just then—they had been married quite some time.

At her request they went home instead of back to the office. "I don't feel up to it, Teddy. If *he* wants to play with my typewriter, let him!"

"Still feeling rocky from the Brodie you pulled?" he asked anxiously.

"Kinda."

She napped most of the afternoon. The tonic, she reflected, that Dr. Potbury had given her did not seem to have done her any real good—left her dizzy, if anything, and with a furry taste in her mouth.

Randall let her sleep. He fiddled around the apartment for a few minutes, set up his dart board and tried to develop an underhand shot, then desisted when it occurred to him that it might wake Cynthia. He looked in on her and found that she was resting peacefully. He decided that she might like a can of beer when she woke up—it was a good excuse to go out; he wanted a beer himself. Bit of a headache, nothing much, but he hadn't felt really chipper since he left the doctor's office. A couple of beers would fix it up.

There was a taproom just this side of the nearest delicatessen. Randall decided to stop for one on draught before returning. Presently he found himself explaining to the proprietor just *why* the reform amalgamation would never turn out the city machine.

He recalled, as he left the place, his original intention. When he got back to their apartment, laden with beer and assorted cold cuts, Cynthia was up and making domestic noises in the kitchen. "Hi, babe!"

"Teddy!"

He kissed her before he put down the packages. "Were you scared when you woke up and found me gone?"

"Not really. But I would rather you had left a note. What have you got there?"

"Suds and cold cuts. Like?"

"Swell. I didn't want to go out for dinner and I was trying to see what I could stir up. But I hadn't any meat in the house." She took them from him.

"Anybody call?"

"Huh-uh. I called the exchange when I woke up. Nothing of interest. But the mirror came."

"Mirror?"

"Don't play innocent. It was a nice surprise, Teddy. Come see how it dresses up the bedroom."

"Let's get this straight," he said. "I don't know anything about a mirror."

She paused, puzzled. "I thought you bought it for me for a surprise. It came prepaid."

"Whom was it addressed to; you or me?"

"I didn't pay much attention; I was half asleep. I just signed something and they unpacked it and hung it for me."

It was a very handsome piece of glass, beveled plate, without a frame, and quite large. Randall conceded that it did things for her dressing table. "If you want a glass like that, honey, I'll get one for you. But this isn't ours. I suppose I'd better call up somebody and tell 'em to take it back. Where's the tag?"

"They took it off, I think. Anyhow it's after six o'clock."

He grinned at her indulgently. "You like it, don't you? Well, it looks like it's yours for tonight—and tomorrow I'll see about getting you another."

It *was* a beautiful mirror; the silvering was

well-nigh perfect and the glass was air-clear. She felt as if she could push her hand through it.

He went to sleep, when they turned in, a little more readily then she did—the nap, no doubt. She rested on one elbow and looked at him for a long time after his breathing had become regular. Sweet Teddy! He was a good boy—good to her certainly. Tomorrow she would tell him not to bother about the other mirror—she didn't need it. All she really wanted was to be with him, for nothing ever to separate them. *Things* did not matter; just being together was the only thing that really mattered.

She glanced at the mirror. It certainly was handsome. So beautifully clear—like an open window. She felt as if she could climb through it, like Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass.

He awoke when his name was called. "Up out of there, Randall! You're late!"

It wasn't Cynthia; that was sure. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and managed to focus them. "Wha's up?"

"You," said Phipps, leaning out through the beveled glass. "Get a move on! Don't keep us waiting."

Instinctively he looked toward the other pillow. Cynthia was gone.

Gone! Then he was up out of bed at once, wide awake, and trying frantically to search everywhere at once. Not in the bathroom. "Cyn!" Not in the living room, not in the kitchen-breakfast room. "Cyn! Cynthia! Where are you?" He pawed frantically in each of the closets. "Cyn!"

He returned to the bedroom and stood there, not knowing where to look next—a tragic, barefooted figure in rumpled pajamas and tousled hair.

Phipps put one hand on the lower edge of the mirror and vaulted easily into the room. "This room should have had a place to install a full-length mirror," he remarked curtly as he settled his coat and straightened his tie. "Every room should have a full-length mirror. Presently we will require it—I shall see to it."

Randall focused his eyes on him as if seeing him for the first time. "Where is she?" he demanded. "What have you done with her?" He stepped toward Phipps menacingly.

"None of your business," retorted Phipps. He inclined his head toward the mirror. "Climb through it."

"Where is she?" he screamed and attempted to grab Phipps by the throat.

Randall was never clear as to just what happened next. Phipps raised one hand—and he found himself tumbled against the side of the bed. He tried to struggle up again—fruitlessly. His efforts had a helpless, nightmare quality. "Mr. Crewes!" Phipps called out. "Mr. Reifsnider—I need your help."

Two more faces, vaguely familiar, appeared in the mirror. "On this side, Mr. Crewes, if you please," Phipps directed. Mr. Crewes climbed through. "Fine! We'll put him through feet first, I think."

Randall had nothing to say about it; he tried to resist, but his muscles were water. Vague twitchings were all he could accomplish. He tried to bite a wrist that came his way and was rewarded with a faceful of hard knuckles—a stinging rap rather than a blow.

"I'll add to that later," Phipps promised him.

They poked him through and dumped him on a table—*the* table. It was the same room he had been in once before, the board room of Detheridge & Co. There were the same pleasant, icy faces around the table, the same jovial, pig-eyed fat man at the head. There was one minor difference; on the long wall was a large mirror which did not reflect the room, but showed their bedroom, his and Cynthia's, as if seen in a mirror, with everything in it swapped left for right.

But he was not interested in such minor phenomena. He tried to sit up, found that he could not, and was forced to make do with simply raising his head. "Where did you put her?" he demanded of the huge chairman.

Stoles smiled at him sympathetically. "Ah, Mr. Randall! So you've come to see us again. You do get around, don't you? Entirely too much, in fact."

"Damn you—tell me what you did with her!"

"Silly and weak and stupid," Stoles mused. "To think that my own brothers and I could create nothing better than you. Well, you shall pay for it. The Bird is cruel!"

At his last emphatic remark he covered his face briefly. The others present followed his motions; someone reached out and clapped a hand roughly over Randall's eyes, then took it away.

Stoles was speaking again; Randall tried to interrupt him—once again Stoles thrust a finger at him and said sternly, "Enough!" Randall found himself unable to talk; his throat choked up and nauseated him whenever he tried it.

"One would suppose," Stoles continued urbanely, "that even one of your poor sort would understand the warning you were given, and heed it." Stoles stopped for a moment and shoved out his lips, pressing them tightly together. "I sometimes think that my only weakness lies in not realizing the full depths of the weakness and stupidity of men. As a reasonable creature myself I seem to have an unfortunate tendency to expect others unlike myself to be reasonable."

He stopped and turned his attention away from Randall and toward one of his colleagues. "Don't raise up any false hopes, Mr. Parker," he said, smiling sweetly. "I do not underrate *you*. And

"Come—I've not time to waste. Step into this mirror—"

if you should wish to wrestle for my right to sit where I sit, I shall oblige you—later. I wonder," he added thoughtfully, "what your blood tastes like."

Mr. Parker was equally courteous. "Much the same as yours, Mr. Chairman, I imagine. It's a pleasant idea, but I am satisfied with the present arrangements."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I like you, Mr. Parker; I had hoped you were ambitious."

"I am patient—like our Ancestor."

"So? Well—back to business. Mr. Randall, I tried before to impress you with the necessity of having nothing to do with—your client. You know the client I mean. What do *you* think would impress you with the fact that the Sons of the Bird will tolerate no interference with their plans? Speak up—tell me."

Randall had heard little of what had taken place and had understood none of it. His whole being was engrossed with a single terrible thought. When he found he could speak again, it spilled forth. "Where is she?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper. "What have you done with her?"

Stoles gestured impatiently. "Sometimes," he said pettishly, "it is almost impossible to get into communication with one of them—almost no mind at all. Mr. Phipps!"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you please see that the other one is fetched in?"

"Certainly, Mr. Stoles." Phipps gathered up an assistant with his eye; the two left the room to return shortly with a burden which they dumped casually on the table beside Randall. It was Cynthia.

The surge of relief was almost more than he could stand. It roared through him, choking him, deafening him, blinding him with tears, and leaving him nothing with which to weigh the present danger of their situation. But gradually the throbbing of his being slowed down enough for him to see that something was wrong; she was quiet. Even if she had been asleep when they carried her in, the rough handling she had received should have been enough to waken her.

His alarm was almost as devastating as his joy had been. "What have you done to her?" he begged. "Is she—"

"No," Stoles answered in disgusted tones, "she is not dead. Control yourself, Mr. Randall." With a wave of his hand he directed his colleagues, "Wake her up."

One of them poked her in the ribs with a forefinger. "Don't bother to wrap it," he remarked; "I'll eat it on the way."

Stoles smiled. "Very witty, Mr. Printemps—

but I said to wake her up. Don't keep me waiting."

"Certainly, Mr. Chairman." He slapped her stingingly across the face; Randall felt it on his own face—in his helpless condition it almost unhinged his reason. "In the Name of the Bird—wake up!"

He saw her chest heave under the silk of her nightgown; her eyes fluttered and she said one word, "Teddy?"

"Cyn! Here, darling, here!"

She turned her head toward him and exclaimed, "Teddy!" then added, "I had such a bad dream—*Oh!*" She had caught sight of them staring greedily at her. She looked slowly around her, wide-eyed and serious, then turned back to Randall. "Teddy—is this still a dream?"

"I'm afraid not, darling. Chin up."

She looked once more at the company, then back to him. "I'm not afraid," she said firmly. "Make your play, Teddy. I won't faint on you again." Thereafter she kept her eyes on his.

Randall stole a glance at the fat chairman; he was watching them, apparently amused by the sight, and showed no present disposition to interfere. "Cyn," Randall said in an urgent whisper, "they've done something to me so I can't move. I'm paralyzed. So don't count on me too much. If you get a chance to make a break for it, take it!"

"I can't move, either," she whispered back. "We'll have to wait." She saw his agonized expression and added, "'Chin up,' you said. But I wish I could touch you." The fingers of her right hand trembled slightly, found some traction on the polished table top, and began a slow and painful progress across the inches that separated them.

Randall found that he could move his own fingers a little; he started his left hand on its way to join hers, a half inch at a time, his arm a dead weight against the movement. At last they touched and her hand crept into his, pressing it faintly. She smiled.

Stoles rapped loudly on the table top. "This little scene is very touching," he said in sympathetic tones, "but there is business to attend to. We must decide the best thing to do with them."

"Hadn't we better eliminate them entirely?" suggested the one who had jabbed Cynthia in the ribs.

"That would be a pleasure," Stoles conceded, "but we must remember that these two are merely an incident in our plans for . . . for Mr. Randall's client. He is the one who must be destroyed!"

"I don't see—"

"Of course you don't see and that is why I am chairman. Our immediate purpose must be to immobilize these two in a fashion which will cause no suspicion on *his* part. The question is merely one of method and of the selection of the subject."

Mr. Parker spoke up. "It would be very amusing," he suggested, "to return them as they are. They would starve slowly, unable to answer the door, unable to answer the telephone, helpless."

"So it would be," Stoles said approvingly. "That is about the caliber of suggestion I expected from you. Suppose he attempted to see them, found them so. Do you think he would not understand their story? No, it must be something which seals their tongues. I intend to send them back with one of them—dead-alive!"

The whole business was so preposterous, so utterly unlikely, that Randall had been telling himself that it could not be real. He was in the clutches of a nightmare; if he could just manage to wake up, everything would be all right. The business of not being able to move—he had experienced that before in dreams. Presently you woke up from it and found that the covers had become wound around you, or you had been sleeping with both hands under your head. He tried biting his tongue so that the pain might wake him, but it did no good.

Stoles' last words brought his attention sharply to what was going on around him, not because he understood them—they meant very little to him, though they were fraught with horror—but because of the stir of approval and anticipation which went around the table.

The pressure of Cynthia's hand in his increased faintly. "What are they going to do, Teddy?" she whispered.

"I don't know, darling."

"The man, of course," Parker commented.

Stoles looked at him. Randall had a feeling that Stoles had intended the—whatever it was that was coming!—for the man, for him, until Parker had suggested it. But Stoles answered, "I'm always grateful for your advice. It makes it so easy to know just what one *should* do." Turning to the others he said, "Prepare the woman."

"Now," thought Randall. "It's got to be *now*." Summoning all the will he possessed he attempted to raise himself up from the table—rise up and fight!

He might just as well not have made the effort.

He let his head sink back, exhausted by the effort. "It's no use, kid," he said miserably.

Cynthia looked at him. If she felt any fear, it was masked by the concern she showed for him. "Chin up, Brain," she answered with the mere suggestion of increased pressure of her hand in his.

Printemps stood up and leaned over her. "This is properly Potiphar's job," he objected.

"He left a prepared bottle," Stoles answered. "You have it, Mr. Phipps?"

Phipps answered by reaching into his brief case and producing it. At a nod from Stoles he passed it over; Printemps accepted it. "The wax?" he added.

"Here you are," Phipps acknowledged, dipping into his brief case again.

"Thank you, sir. Now, if someone will get *that* out of the way"—indicating Randall as he spoke —"we seem to be ready." Half a dozen savagely willing hands manhandled Randall to the extreme far edge of the table; Printemps bent over Cynthia, bottle in hand.

"One moment," Stoles interrupted. "I want them both to understand what is happening and why. Mrs. Randall," he continued, bowing gallantly, "in our short interview earlier I believe I made you understand that the Sons of the Bird will brook no interference from such as you two. You understood that, did you not?"

"I understood you," she answered. But her eyes were defiant.

"Good. Be it understood that it is our wish that your husband have nothing more to do with . . . a certain party. In order to insure that result we are about to split you into two parts. The part that keeps you going, that which you rather amusingly call the soul, we will squeeze into this bottle and keep. As for the rest, well, your husband may have that to keep with him, as a reminder that the Sons of the Bird have you in pawn. You understand me?"

She ignored the question. Randall tried to answer, found that his throat was misbehaving again.

"Listen to me, Mrs. Randall; if you are ever to see your husband again it is imperative that he obey us. He must not, on pain of your death, see his client again. Under the same penalty he must hold his tongue concerning us and all that has transpired. If he does not—well, we will make your death very interesting, I assure you."

Randall tried to cry out that he would promise anything they wanted to spare her, but his voice was still silenced—apparently Stoles wanted to hear from Cynthia first. She shook her head. "He'll do as he thinks wise."

Stoles smiled. "Fine," he said. "That was the answer I wanted. You, Mr. Randall—do you promise?"

He wanted to agree, he was about to agree—but Cynthia was saying, "No!" with her eyes. From her expression he knew that *her* speech was now being blocked. Inside his head, clear as speech, he seemed to hear her say, "It's a trick, Brain. Don't promise!"

He kept quiet.

Phipps dug a thumb into his eye. "Answer when you are spoken to!"

He had to squint the injured eye in order to see Cynthia, but her expression still approved; he kept his mouth shut.

Presently Stoles said, "Never mind. Get on with it, gentlemen."

Printemps stuck the bottle under Cynthia's nose, held it against her left nostril. "Now!" he directed. Another of them pressed down on her short ribs vigorously, so that her breath was expelled suddenly. She grunted.

"Teddy," she said, "they're pulling me apar—*Ugh!*"

The process had been repeated with the bottle at the other nostril. Randall felt the soft warm hand in his suddenly relax. Printemps held up the bottle with his thumb over its top. "Let's have the wax," he said briskly. Having sealed it he passed it over to Phipps.

Stoles jerked a thumb toward the big mirror. "Put them back," he directed.

Phipps superintended the passing of Cynthia back through the glass, then turned to Stoles. "Couldn't we give him something to make him remember us?" he inquired.

"Help yourselves," Stoles answered indifferently, as he stood up to go, "but try not to leave any permanent marks."

"Fine!" Phipps smiled, and hit Randall a backhanded swipe that loosened his teeth. "We'll be careful!"

He remained conscious through a considerable portion of it, though, naturally, he had no way of judging what proportion. He passed out once or twice, only to come to again under the stimulus of still greater pain. It was the novel way Phipps found of holding a man down without marking him which caused him to pass out for the last time.

He was in a small room, every side of which was a mirror—four walls, floor, and ceiling. Endlessly he was repeated in every direction and every image was himself—selves that hated him but from which there was no escape. "Hit him again!" they yelled—*he* yelled—and struck himself in the teeth with his closed fist. They—*he*—cackled.

They were closing in on him and he could not run fast enough. His muscles would not obey him, no matter how urgently he tried. It was because he was handcuffed—handcuffed to the treadmill they had put him on. He was blindfolded, too, and the handcuffs kept him from reaching his eyes. But he had to keep on—Cynthia was at the top of the climb; he had to reach her.

Only, of course, there is no top when you are on a treadmill.

He was terribly tired, but every time he slowed down the least little bit they hit him again. And he was required to count the steps, too, else he got no credit for it—ten thousand ninety-one, ten thousand ninety-two, ten thousand ninety-three, up and down, up and down—if he could only *see* where he was going.

He stumbled; they clipped him from behind and he fell forward on his face.

When he woke his face was pressed up against something hard and lumpy and cold. He shifted away from it and found that his whole body was stiff. His feet did not work as they should—he investigated by the uncertain light from the window and found that he had dragged the sheet half off the bed and had it tangled around his ankles.

The hard cold object was the steam radiator; he had been huddled in a heap against it. He was beginning to regain his orientation; he was in his own familiar bedroom. He must have walked in his sleep—he hadn't pulled that stunt since he was a kid! Walked in his sleep, tripped, and smashed his head into the radiator. Must 'a' knocked him silly, colder'n a coot—damn lucky he hadn't killed himself.

He was beginning to pull himself together, and to crawl painfully to his feet, when he noticed the one unfamiliar thing in the room—the new big mirror. It brought the rest of his dream back with a rush; he leaped toward the bed. "Cynthia!"

But she was there where she belonged, safe and unharmed. She had not awakened at his outcry, of which he was glad; he did not want to frighten her. He tiptoed away from the bed and let himself quietly into the bathroom, closing the door behind him before he turned on the light.

A pretty sight! he mused. His nose had been bloodied; it had long since stopped bleeding and the blood had congealed. It made a gory mess of the front of his pajama jacket. Besides that, he had apparently lain with the right side of his face in the stuff—it had dried on, messily, making him appear much more damaged than he was, as he discovered when he bathed his face.

Actually, he did not seem to be much damaged, except that— *Wow!*—the whole right side of his body was stiff and sore—probably banged it and wrenched it when he fell, then caught cold in it. He wondered how long he had been out.

He took off the jacket, decided that it would be too much effort to try to wash it out then, rolled it into a ball and chucked it behind the toilet seat. He didn't want Cyn to see it until he had had a chance to explain to her what had happened. "Why, Teddy, what in the world have you done to yourself?" "Nothing, kid, nothing at all—just ran into a radiator!"

That sounded worse than the old one about running into a door.

He was still groggy, groggier than he had thought—he had almost pitched on his head when he threw the jacket down, had been forced to steady himself by grabbing the top of the tank. And his head was pounding like a Salvation Army drum. He fiddled around in the medicine cabinet, located some aspirin and took three tablets, then looked thoughtfully at a prescription box of amytal Cynthia had obtained some months before. He had never needed anything of the sort before; he slept soundly—but this was a special case. Nightmares two nights running and now sleepwalking and damn near breaking his silly neck.

He took one of the capsules, thinking as he did so that the kid had something when she thought they needed a vacation—he felt all shot.

Clean pajamas were too hard to find without turning on the bedroom light—he slipped into bed, waited a moment to see if Cyn would stir, then closed his eyes and tried to relax. Inside of a few minutes the drugs began to take hold, the throbbing in his head eased up, and soon he was sound asleep.

VII.

Sunlight in his face woke him up; he focused one eye on the clock on the dressing table and saw that it was past nine o'clock, whereupon he got out of bed hastily. It was, he found, not quite a bright thing to do—his right side gave him fits. Then he saw the brown stain under the radiator and recalled his accident.

Cautiously he turned his head and took a look at his wife. She was still sleeping quietly, showing no disposition to stir. That suited him; it would be better, he thought to tell her what had happened *after* he had dosed her with orange juice. No point in scaring the kid.

He groped on his slippers, then hung his bathrobe around him, as his bare shoulders felt cold and the muscles were sore. His mouth tasted better after he had brushed his teeth; breakfast began to seem like a good idea.

His mind dwelt absent-mindedly on the past night, fingering his recollections rather than grasping them. These nightmares, he thought as he squeezed the oranges—not so good. Maybe not crazy, but definitely not so good, neurotic. Got to put a stop to 'em. Man couldn't work if he spent the night chasing butterflies, even if he didn't fall over his feet and break his neck. Man had to have sleep—definitely.

He drank his own glass of juice, then carried the other into the bedroom. "Come on, bright eyes—*reveille!*" When she did not stir at once he began to sing, "Up with the buttercup, come on, get up, get up! Here comes the sun!"

Still she did not budge. He set the glass down carefully on the bedside table, sat down on the edge of the bed, and took her by the shoulder. "Wake up, kid! They're movin' hell—two loads have gone by already!"

She did not move. Her shoulder was cold.

"Cyn!" he yelled. "Cyn! *Cyn!*" He shook her violently.

She flopped lifelessly. He shook her again. "Cyn darling— Oh, God!"

Presently the shock itself steadied him; he blew his fuses, so to speak, and was ready, with a sort of ashy dead calmness to do whatever might be necessary. He was convinced without knowing why, nor yet fully appreciating it, that she was dead. But he set about making sure by such means as he knew. He could not find her pulse —perhaps he was too clumsy, he told himself, or perhaps it was too weak; all the while a chorus in the back of his mind shouted, "She's dead . . . dead . . . dead—and you let her die!"

He placed an ear over her heart. It seemed that he could hear her heart beat, but he could not be sure; it might have been only the pounding of his own. He gave up presently and looked around for a small mirror.

He found what he wanted in Cynthia's handbag, a little make-up glass. He polished it carefully on the sleeve of his robe and held it to her half-opened mouth.

It fogged faintly.

He took it away in a bemused fashion, not letting himself hope, polished it again, and put it back to her mouth. Again it fogged, lightly but definitely.

She was alive—she was *alive!*

He wondered a moment later why he could not see her clearly and discovered that his face was wet. He wiped his eyes and went on with what he had to do. There was that needle business—if he could find a needle. He did find one in a pincushion on her dressing table. He brought it back to the bed, took a pinch of skin on her forearm, said, "Excuse me, kid," in a whisper, and jabbed it in.

The puncture showed a drop of blood, then closed at once—alive. He wished for a fever thermometer, but they had none—they were both too healthy. But he did remember something he had read somewhere, something about the invention of the stethoscope. You rolled up a piece of paper—

He found one of suitable size and rolled it into a one-inch tube which he pushed against the bare skin just over her heart. He put his ear to the other end and listened.

Lubadup—lubadup—lubadup—lubadup— Faint, but steady and strong. No doubt about it this time; she was alive; her heart was beating.

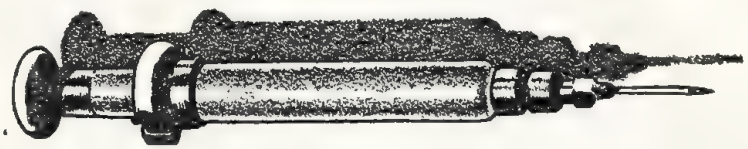
He had to sit down for a moment.

Randall forced himself to consider what to do next. Call a doctor, obviously. When people were sick, you called a doctor. He had not thought of it up to this time because Cyn and he just never did, never needed to. He could not recall that either one of them had had occasion to do so since they had been married.

Call the police and ask for an ambulance maybe? No, he'd get some police surgeon more used to crash cases and shootings than anything like this. He wanted the best.

But who? They didn't have a family physician. There was Smyles—a rum dump, no good. And Hartwick—hell, Hartwick specialized in very private operations for society people. He picked up the phone book.

Potbury! He didn't know anything about the old beezer, but he looked competent. He looked



up the number, misdialed three times, then got the operator to call it for him.

"Yes, this is Potbury. What do you want? Speak up, man."

"I said this is Randall. Randall. R-A-N-D-A-double L. My wife and I came to see you yesterday, remember? About—"

"Yes, I remember. What is it?"

"My wife is sick."

"What's the trouble? Did she faint again?"

"No . . . yes. That is, she's unconscious. She woke up unconscious—I mean she never did wake up. She's unconscious now; she looks like she's dead."

"Is she?"

"I don't think so—but she's awful bad off, doctor. I'm scared. Can you come over right away?"

There was a short silence, then Potbury said gruffly, "I'll be over."

"Oh, good! Look—what should I do before you get here?"

"Don't do anything. Don't touch her. I'll be right over." He hung up.

Randall put the phone down and hurried back to the bedroom. Cynthia was just the same. He started to touch her, recalled the doctor's instructions, and straightened up with a jerk. But his

eye fell on the piece of paper from which he had improvised a stethoscope and he could not resist the temptation to check up on his earlier results.

The tube gave back a cheering *lubadup;* he took it away at once and put it down.

Ten minutes of standing and looking at her with nothing more constructive to do than biting his nails left him too nervous to continue the occupation. He went out to the kitchen and removed a bottle of rye from the top shelf from which he poured a generous three fingers into a water glass. He looked at the amber stuff for a moment, then poured it down the sink, and went back into the bedroom.

She was still the same.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had not given Potbury the address. He dashed into the kitchen and snatched the phone. Controlling himself, he managed to dial the number correctly. A girl answered the phone. "No, the doctor isn't in the office. Any message?"

"My name is Randall. I—"

"Oh—Mr. Randall. The doctor left for your home about fifteen minutes ago. He should be there any minute now."

"But he doesn't have my address!"

"What? Oh, I'm sure he has—if he didn't have he would have telephoned me by now."

He put the phone down. It was damned funny—well, he would give Potbury three more minutes, then try another one.

The house phone buzzed; he was up out of his chair like a punch-drunk welterweight. "Yes?"

"Potbury. That you, Randall?"

"Yes, yes—come on up!" He punched the door release as he spoke.

Randall was waiting with the door open when Potbury arrived. "Come in, doctor! Come in, come in!" Potbury nodded and brushed on by him.

"Where's the patient?"

"In here." Randall conducted him with nervous haste into the bedroom and leaned over the other side of the bed while Potbury took his first look at the unconscious woman. "How is she? Will she be all right? Tell me, doctor—"

Potbury straightened up a little, grunting as he did so, and said, "If you will kindly stand away from the bed and quit crowding me, perhaps we will find out."

"Oh, sorry!" Randall retreated to the doorway. Potbury took his stethoscope from his bag, listened for a while with an inscrutable expression on his face which Randall tried vainly to read, shifted the instrument around, and listened again. Presently he put the stethoscope back in the bag, and Randall stepped forward eagerly.

But Potbury ignored him. He peeled up an eyelid with his thumb and examined her pupil, lifted an arm so that it swung free over the side of the bed and tapped it near the elbow, then straightened himself up and just looked at her for several minutes.

Randall wanted to scream.

Potbury performed several more of the strange, almost ritualistic things physicians do, some of which Randall thought he understood, others which he definitely did not. At last he said suddenly, "What did she do yesterday—after you left my office?"

Randall told him; Potbury nodded sagely. "That's what I expected—it all dates back to the shock she had in the morning. All your fault, if I may say so!"

"My fault, doctor?"

"You were warned. Should never have let her get close to a man like that."

"But . . . but . . . you didn't warn me until *after* he had frightened her."

Potbury seemed a little vexed at this. "Perhaps not, perhaps not. Thought you told me someone had warned you before I did. Should know better, anyhow, with a creature like that."

Randall dropped the matter. "But how is she, doctor? Will she get well? She will, won't she?"

"You've got a very sick woman on your hands, Mr. Randall."

"Yes, I know she is—but what's the matter with her?"

"*Lethargica gravis,* brought on by psychic trauma."

"Is that—serious?"

"Quite serious enough. If you take proper care of her, I expect she will pull through."

"Anything, doctor, anything? Money's no object. What do we do now? Take her to a hospital?"

Potbury brushed the suggestion aside. "Worst thing in the world for her. If she wakes up in strange surroundings, she may go off again. Keep her here. Can you arrange your affairs so as to watch her yourself?"

"You bet I can."

"Then do so. Stay with her night and day. If she wakes up, the most favorable condition will be for her to find herself in her own bed with you awake and near her."

"Oughtn't she to have a nurse?"

"I wouldn't say so. There isn't much that can be done for her, except to keep her covered up warm. You might keep her feet a little higher than her head. Put a couple of books under each of the lower feet of the bed."

"Right away."

"If this condition persists for more than a week or so, we'll have to see about glucose injections, or something of the sort." Potbury stooped over, closed his bag and picked it up. "Telephone me

if there is any change in her condition."

"I will. I—" Randall stopped suddenly; the doctor's last remark reminded him of something he had forgotten. "Doctor—how did you find your way over here?"

Potbury looked startled. "What do you mean? This place isn't hard to find."

"But I didn't give you the address."

"Eh? Nonsense."

"But I didn't. I remembered the oversight just a few minutes later and called your office back, but you had already left."

"I didn't say you gave it to me today," Potbury said testily; "you gave it to me yesterday."

Randall thought it over. He *had* offered Potbury his credentials the day before, but they contained only his business address. True, his home telephone was listed, but it was listed simply as a night business number, without address, both in his credentials and in the phone book. Perhaps Cynthia—

But he could not ask Cynthia and the thought of her drove minor considerations out of his mind. "Are you sure there is nothing else I should do, doctor?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing. Stay here and watch her."

"I will. But I surely wish I were twins for a while," he added emphatically.

"Why?" Potbury inquired, as he gathered up his gloves and turned toward the door.

"That guy Hoag. I've got a score to settle with him. Never mind—I'll put somebody else on his tail until I have a chance to settle his hash myself."

Potbury had wheeled around and was looking at him ominously. "You'll do nothing of the sort. Your place is here."

"Sure, sure—but I want to keep him on ice. One of these days I'm going to take him apart to see what makes him tick!"

"Young man," Potbury said slowly, "I want you to promise me that you will have nothing to do *in any way* with . . . with this man you mentioned."

Randall glanced toward the bed. "In view of what has happened," he said savagely, "do you think I'm going to let him get away scot-free?"

"In the name of— Look. I'm older than you are and I've learned to expect silliness and stupidity. Still—how much does it take to teach you that some things are too dangerous to monkey with?" He gestured toward Cynthia. "How can you expect me to be responsible for her recovery if you insist on doing things that might bring on a catastrophe?"

"But—listen, Dr. Potbury, I told you that I intended to follow your instructions about *her*. But I'm not going to just forget what he has done. If she dies . . . if she dies, so help me, I'll take him apart with a rusty ax!"

Potbury did not answer at once. When he did all he said was, "And if she doesn't die?"

"If she doesn't die, my first business is here, taking care of her. But don't expect me to promise to forget Hoag. I won't—and that's final."

Potbury jammed his hat on his head. "We'll let it go at that—and trust she doesn't die. But let me tell you, young man, you're a fool." He stomped out of the apartment.

The lift he had gotten from tangling wills with Potbury wore off in a few minutes after the doctor had gone, and a black depression settled down on him. There was nothing to do, nothing to distract his mind from the aching apprehension he felt over Cynthia. He did make the arrangements to raise the foot of the bed a little as suggested by Potbury, but it takes only a few minutes to perform such a trifling chore; when it was done he had nothing to occupy him.

In raising the foot of the bed he had been very cautious at first to avoid jarring the bed for fear of waking her; then he realized that waking her was just what he wanted most to do. Nevertheless he could not bring himself to be rough and noisy about it—she looked so helpless lying there.

He pulled a chair up close to the bed, where he could touch one of her hands and watch her closely for any change. By holding rigidly still he found that he could just perceive the rise and fall of her breast. It reassured him a little; he spent a long time watching for it—the slow, unnoticeable intake, the much quicker spilling of the breath.

Her face was pale and frighteningly deathlike, but beautiful. It wrung his heart to look at her. So fragile—she had trusted him so completely—and now there was nothing he could do for her. If he had listened to her, if he had only listened to what she had said, this would not have happened to her. She had been afraid, but she had done what he asked her to do.

Even the Sons of the Bird had not been able to frighten her—

What was he saying? Get a grip on yourself, Ed—*that* didn't happen; that was part of your nightmare. Still, if anything like that had happened, that was just what she would do—stick in there and back up his play, no matter how badly things were going.

He got a certain melancholy satisfaction out of the idea that, even in his dreams, he was sure of her, sure of her courage and her devotion to him. Guts—more than most men. There was the time she knocked the acid bottle out of the hands of that crazy old biddy he had caught out in the Midwell case. If she hadn't been quick and courageous then, he would probably be wearing smoked glasses now, with a dog to lead him around.

If mirrors were their doorways—there was a way to plug that.

He displaced the covers a little and looked at the scar on her arm she had picked up that day. None of the acid had touched him, but some had touched her—it still showed, it always would show. But she didn't seem to care.

"Cynthia! Oh, Cyn, my darling!"

There came a time when even he could not remain in one position any longer. Painfully—the cold he had caught in his muscles after the accident last night made his cramped legs ache like fury—he got himself up and prepared to cope with necessities. The thought of food was repugnant but he knew that he had to feed himself if he were to be strong enough to accomplish the watching and waiting that was going to be necessary.

Rummaging through the kitchen shelves and the icebox turned up some oddments of food, breakfast things, a few canned goods, staples, some tired lettuce. He had no stomach for involved cooking; a can of soup seemed as good a bet as anything. He opened a can of Scotch broth, dumped it into a saucepan and added water. When it had simmered for a few minutes he took it off the fire and ate it from the pan, standing up. It tasted like stewed cardboard.

He went back to the bedroom and sat down again to resume the endless watching. But it soon developed that his feelings with respect to food were sounder than his logic; he bolted hastily for the bathroom and was very sick for a few minutes. Then he washed his face, rinsed out his mouth, and came back to his chair, weak and pale, but feeling sound enough physically.

It began to grow dusky outside; he switched on the dressing-table lamp, shaded it so that it would not shine directly in her eyes, and again sat down. She was unchanged.

The telephone rang.

It startled him almost out of rational response. He and his sorrow had been sitting there watching for so long that he was hardly aware that there could be anything else in the world. But he pulled himself together and answered it.

"Hello? Yes, this is Randall, speaking."

"Mr. Randall, I've had time to think it over and I feel that I owe you an apology—and an explanation."

"Owe me what? Who is this speaking?"

"Why, this is Jonathan Hoag, Mr. Randall. When you—"

"Hoag! Did you say *'Hoag'?"*

"Yes, Mr. Randall. I want to apologize for my peremptory manner yesterday morning and to beg your indulgence. I trust that Mrs. Randall was not upset by my—"

By this time Randall was sufficiently recovered from his first surprise to express himself. He did so, juicily, using words and figures of speech picked up during years of association with the sort of characters that a private detective inevitably runs into. When he had finished there was a gasp from the other end of the line and then a dead silence.

He was not satisfied. He wanted Hoag to speak so that he could interrupt him and continue the tirade. "Are you there, Hoag?"

"Uh, yes."

"I wanted to add this: Maybe you think that it is a joke to catch a woman alone in a hallway and scare the daylights out of her. I don't! But I'm not going to turn you over to the police—no, indeed! Just as soon as Mrs. Randall gets well, I'm going to look you up myself and then—God help you, Hoag. You'll need it."

There followed such a long silence that Randall was sure that his victim had hung up. But it seemed that Hoag was merely collecting his wits. "Mr. Randall, this is terrible—"

"You bet it is!"

"Do you mean to tell me that I accosted Mrs. Randall and frightened her?"

"You should know!"

"But I don't know, truly I don't." He paused, and then continued in an unsteady voice. "This is the sort of thing I have been afraid of, Mr. Randall, afraid that I might discover that during my lapses of memory I might have been doing terrible things. But to have harmed Mrs. Randall—she was so good to me, so kind to me. This is horrible."

"You're telling me!"

Hoag sighed as if he were tired beyond endurance. "Mr. Randall?" Randall did not answer. "Mr. Randall—there is no use in me deluding myself; there is only one thing to be done. You've got to turn me over to the police."

"Huh?"

"I've known it ever since our last conversation; I thought about it all day yesterday, but I did not have the courage. I had hoped that I was through with my . . . my *other* personality, but today it happened again. The whole day is a blank and I just came to myself this evening, on getting home. Then I knew that I *had* to do something about it, so I called you to ask you to resume your investigations. But I never suspected that I could possibly have done anything to Mrs. Randall." He seemed most convincingly overcome by shock at the idea. "When did . . . did *this* happen, Mr. Randall?"

Randall found himself in a most bewildered state of mind. He was torn between the desire to climb through the phone and wring the neck of the man he held responsible for his wife's desperate condition and the necessity for remaining where he was to care for her. In addition to that he was bothered by the fact that Hoag refused to talk like a villain. While speaking with him, listening to his mild answers and his worried tones, it was difficult to maintain the conception of him as a horrid monster of the Jack-the-Ripper type—although he knew consciously that villains were often mild in manner.

Therefore his answer was merely factual. "Nine thirty in the morning, about."

"Where was I at nine thirty this morning?"

"Not *this* morning, you so-and-so; yesterday morning."

"Yesterday morning? But that's not possible. Don't you remember? I was at home yesterday morning."

"Of course I remember, and I saw you leave. Maybe you didn't know *that."* He was not being very logical; the other events of the previous morning had convinced him that Hoag knew that they were shadowing him—but he was in no state of mind to be logical.

"But you couldn't have seen me. Yesterday morning was the only morning, aside from my usual Wednesdays, on which I can be sure where I was. I was at home, in my apartment. I didn't leave it until nearly one o'clock when I went to my club."

"Why, that's a—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Randall, please! I'm just as confused and upset about this as you are, but you've got to listen to me. You broke my routine—remember? And my other personality did not assert itself. After you left I remained my . . . my *proper* self. That's why I had had hopes that I was free at last."

"The hell you did. What makes you think you did?"

"I know my own testimony doesn't count for much," Hoag said meekly, "but I wasn't alone.

The cleaning woman arrived just after you left and was here all morning."

"Damned funny I didn't see her go up."

"She works in the building," Hoag explained. "She's the wife of the janitor—her name is Mrs. Jenkins. Would you like to talk with her? I can probably locate her and get her on the line."

"But—" Randall was getting more and more confused and was beginning to realize that he was at a disadvantage. He should never have discussed matters with Hoag at all; he should have simply saved him up until there was opportunity to take a crack at him. Potbury was right; Hoag was a slick and insidious character. Alibi indeed!

Furthermore he was becoming increasingly nervous and fretful over having stayed away from the bedroom as long as he had. Hoag must have had him on the phone at least ten minutes; it was not possible to see into the bedroom from where he sat at the breakfast table. "No, I don't want to talk to her," he said roughly. "You lie in circles!" He slammed the phone back into its cradle and hurried into the bedroom.

Cynthia was just as he had left her, looking merely asleep and heartbreakingly lovely. She was breathing, he quickly determined; her respiration was light but regular. His homemade stethoscope rewarded him with the sweet sound of her heartbeat.

He sat and watched her for a while, letting the misery of his situation soak into him like a warm and bitter wine. He did not want to forget his pain; he hugged it to him, learning what countless others had learned before him, that even the deepest pain concerning a beloved one is preferable to any surcease.

Later he stirred himself, realizing that he was indulging himself in a fashion that might work to her detriment. It was necessary to have food in the house for one thing, and to manage to eat some and keep it down. Tomorrow, he told himself, he would have to get busy on the telephone and see what he could do about keeping the business intact while he was away from it. The Night Watch Agency might do as a place to farm out any business that could not be put off; they were fairly reliable and he had done favors for them—but that could wait until tomorrow.

Just now— He called up the delicatessen on the street below and did some very desultory telephone shopping. He authorized the proprietor to throw in anything else that looked good and that would serve to keep a man going for a day or two. He then instructed him to find someone who would like to earn two bits by delivering the stuff to his apartment.

That done, he betook himself to the bathroom and shaved carefully, having a keen appreciation of the connection between a neat toilet and morale. He left the door open and kept one eye on the bed. He then took a rag, dampened it, and wiped up the stain under the radiator. The bloody pajama jacket he stuffed into the dirty-clothes hamper in the closet.

He sat down and waited for the order from the delicatessen to arrive. All the while he had been thinking over his conversation with Hoag. There was only one thing about Hoag that was clear, he concluded, and that was that everything about him was confusing. His original story had been wacky enough—imagine coming in and offering a high fee to have himself shadowed! But the events since made that incident seem downright reasonable. There was the matter of the thirteenth floor—damn it! He *had* seen that thirteenth floor, been on it, watched Hoag at work with a jeweler's glass screwed in his eye.

Yet he could not possibly have done so.

What did it add up to? Hypnotism, maybe? Randall was not naïve about such things; he knew that hypnotism existed, but he knew also that it was not nearly as potent as the Sunday-supplement feature writers would have one believe. As for hypnotizing a man in a split second on a crowded street so that he believed in and could recall clearly a sequence of events that had never taken place—well, he just didn't believe in it. If a thing like that were true, then the whole world might be just a fraud and an illusion.

Maybe it was.

Maybe the whole world held together only when you kept your attention centered on it and believed in it. If you let discrepancies creep in, you began to doubt and it began to go to pieces. Maybe this had happened to Cynthia because he had doubted her reality. If he just closed his eyes and *believed* in her alive and well, then she would be—

He tried it. He shut out the rest of the world and concentrated on Cynthia—Cynthia alive and well, with that little quirk to her mouth she had when she was laughing at something he had said—Cynthia, waking up in the morning, sleepy-eyed and beautiful—Cynthia in a tailored suit and a pert little hat, ready to start out with him anywhere. Cynthia—

He opened his eyes and looked at the bed. There she still lay, unchanged and deathly. He let himself go for a while, then blew his nose and went in to put some water on his face.

VIII.

The house buzzer sounded. Randall went to the hall door and jiggled the street-door release without using the apartment phone—he did not want to speak to anyone just then, certainly not

to whoever it was that Joe had found to deliver the groceries.

After a reasonable interval there was a soft knock at the door. He opened it, saying, "Bring 'em in," then stopped suddenly.

Hoag stood just outside the door.

Neither of them spoke at first. Randall was astounded; Hoag seemed diffident and waiting for Randall to commence matters. At last he said shyly, "I *had* to come, Mr. Randall. May I . . . come in?"

Randall stared at him, really at loss for words. The brass of the man—the sheer gall!

"I came because I had to prove to you that I would not willingly harm Mrs. Randall," he said simply. "If I have done so unknowingly, I want to do what I can to make restitution."

"It's too late for restitution!"

"But, Mr. Randall—why do you think that *I* have done anything to your wife? I don't see how I could have—not yesterday morning." He stopped and looked hopelessly at Randall's stony face. "You wouldn't shoot a dog without a fair trial—would you?"

Randall chewed his lip in an agony of indecision. Listening to him, the man seemed so damned decent— He threw the door open wide. "Come in," he said gruffly.

"Thank you, Mr. Randall." Hoag came in diffidently. Randall started to close the door.

"Your name Randall?" Another man, a stranger, stood in the door, loaded with bundles.

"Yes," Randall admitted, fishing in his pocket for a quarter. "How did you get in?"

"Came in with *him,*" the man said, pointing at Hoag, "but I got off at the wrong floor. The beer is cold, chief," he added ingratiatingly. "Right off the ice."

"Thanks." Randall added a dime to the quarter and closed the door on him. He picked the bundles up from the floor and started for the kitchen. He would have some of that beer now, he decided; there was never a time when he needed it more. After putting the packages down in the kitchen he took out one of the cans, fumbled in the drawer for an opener, and prepared to open it.

A movement caught his eye—Hoag, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other. Randall had not invited him to sit down; he was still standing. "Sit down!"

"Thank you." Hoag sat down.

Randall turned back to his beer. But the incident had reminded him of the other's presence; he found himself caught in the habit of good manners; it was almost impossible for him to pour himself a beer and offer none to a guest, no matter how unwelcome.

He hesitated just a moment, then thought, Shucks, it can't hurt either Cynthia or me to let him have a can of beer. "Do you drink beer?"

"Yes, thank you." As a matter of fact Hoag rarely drank beer, preferring to reserve his palate for the subtleties of wines, but at the moment he would probably have said yes to synthetic gin, or ditch water, if Randall had offered it.

Randall brought in the glasses, put them down, then went into the bedroom, opening the door for the purpose just enough to let him slip in. Cynthia was just as he had come to expect her to be. He shifted her position a trifle, in the belief that any position grows tiring even to a person unconscious, then smoothed the coverlet. He looked at her and thought about Hoag and Potbury's warnings against Hoag. Was Hoag as dangerous as the doctor seemed to think? Was he, Randall, even now playing into his hands?

No, Hoag could not hurt him now. When the worst has happened any change is an improvement. The death of both of them—or even Cyn's death alone, for then he would simply follow her. That he had decided earlier in the day—and he didn't give a damn who called it cowardly!

No—if Hoag were responsible for this, at least he had shot his bolt. He went back into the living room.

Hoag's beer was still untouched. "Drink up," Randall invited, sitting down and reaching for his own glass. Hoag complied, having the good sense not to offer a toast nor even to raise his glass in the gesture of one. Randall looked him over with tired curiosity. "I don't understand you, Hoag."

"I don't understand myself, Mr. Randall."

"Why did you come here?"

Hoag spread his hands helplessly. "To inquire about Mrs. Randall. To find out what it is that I have done to her. To make up for it, if I can."

"You admit you did it?"

"No, Mr. Randall. No. I don't see how I could possibly have done anything to Mrs. Randall *yesterday* morning—"

"You forget that I saw you."

"But— What did I do?"

"You cornered Mrs. Randall in a corridor of the Midway-Copton Building and tried to choke her."

"Oh, dear! But—you *saw* me do this?"

"No, not exactly. I was—" Randall stopped, realizing how it was going to sound to tell Hoag that he had not seen him in one part of the building because he was busy watching Hoag in another part of the building.

"Go on, Mr. Randall, please."

Randall got nervously to his feet. "It's no use," he snapped. "I don't know what you did. I don't know that you did anything! All I know is this: Since the first day you walked in that door, odd things have been happening to my wife and me—*evil* things—and now she's lying in there

as if she were dead. She's—" He stopped and covered his face with his hands.

He felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. "Mr. Randall . . . please, Mr. Randall. I'm sorry and I would like to help."

"I don't know how anyone can help—unless you know some way of waking up my wife. Do you, Mr. Hoag?"

Hoag shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I don't. Tell me—what is the matter with her? I don't know yet."

"There isn't much to tell. She didn't wake up this morning. She acts as if she never would wake up."

"You're sure she's not . . . dead?"

"No, she's not dead."

"You had a doctor, of course. What did he say?"

"He told me not to move her and to watch her closely."

"Yes, but what did he say was the matter with her?"

"He called it *lethargica gravis.*"

"*Lethargica gravis?* Was that all he called it?"

"Yes—why?"

"But didn't he attempt to diagnose it?"

"That was his diagnosis—*lethargica gravis.*"

Hoag still seemed puzzled. "But, Mr. Randall, that isn't a diagnosis; it is just a pompous way of saying 'heavy sleep.' It really doesn't mean anything. It's like telling a man with skin trouble that he has *dermatitis,* or a man with stomach trouble that he has *gastritis.* What tests did he make?"

"Uh . . . I don't know. I—"

"Did he take a sample with a stomach pump?"

"No."

"X ray?"

"No, there wasn't any way to."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Randall, that a doctor just walked in, took a look at her, and walked out again, without doing anything for her, or applying any tests, or bringing in a consulting opinion? Was he your family doctor?"

"No," Randall said miserably. "I'm afraid I don't know much about doctors. We never need one. But you ought to know whether he's any good or not—it was Potbury."

"Potbury? You mean the Dr. Potbury I consulted? How did you happen to pick him?"

"Well, we didn't *know* any doctors—and we had been to see him, checking up on your story. What have you got against Potbury?"

"Nothing, really. He was rude to me—or so I thought."

"Well, then, what's he got against you?"

"I don't see how he could have anything against me," Hoag answered in puzzled tones. "I only saw him once. Except, of course, the matter of the analysis. Though why he should—" He shrugged helplessly.

"You mean about the stuff under your nails? I thought that was just a song and dance."

"No."

"Anyhow it couldn't be just that. After all the things he said about you."

"What did he say about me?"

"He said—" Randall stopped, realizing that Potbury had not said anything specific against Hoag; it had been entirely what he did not say. "It wasn't so much what he said; it was how he felt about you. He hates you, Hoag—and he is afraid of you."

"Afraid of *me?*" Hoag smiled feebly, as if he were sure Randall must be joking.

"He didn't *say* so, but it was plain as daylight."

Hoag shook his head. "I don't understand it. I'm more used to being afraid of people than of having them afraid of me. Wait—did he tell *you* the results of the analysis he made for me?"

"No. Say, that reminds me of the queerest thing of all about you, Hoag." He broke off, thinking of the impossible adventure of the thirteenth floor. "Are you a hypnotist?"

"Gracious, no! Why do you ask?"

Randall told him the story of their first attempt to shadow him. Hoag kept quiet through the recital, his face intent and bewildered. "And that's the size of it," Randall concluded emphatically. "No thirteenth floor, no Detheridge & Co., no nothing! And yet I remember every detail of it as plainly as I see your face."

"That's all?"

"Isn't that enough? Still, there is one more thing I might add. It can't be of real importance, except in showing the effect the experience had on me."

"What is it?"

"Wait a minute."

Randall got up and went again into the bedroom. He was not quite so careful this time to open the door the bare minimum, although he did close it behind him. It made him nervous, in one way, not to be constantly at Cynthia's side; yet had he been able to answer honestly he would have been forced to admit that even Hoag's presence was company and some relief to his anxiety. Consciously, he excused his conduct as an attempt to get to the bottom of their troubles.

He listened for her heartbeats again. Satisfied that she still was in this world, he plumped her pillow and brushed vagrant hair up from her face. He leaned over and kissed her forehead lightly, then went quickly out of the room.

Hoag was waiting. "Yes?" he inquired.

Randall sat down heavily and rested his head on his hands. "Still the same." Hoag refrained from making a useless answer; presently Randall com-

menced in a tired voice to tell him of the nightmares he had experienced the last two nights. "Mind you, I don't say they are significant," he added, when he had done. "I'm not superstitious."

"I wonder," Hoag mused.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything supernatural, but isn't it possible that the dreams were not entirely accidental ones, brought on by your experiences? I mean to say, if there is someone who can make you dream the things you dreamed in the Acme Building in broad daylight, why couldn't they force you to dream at night as well?"

"Huh?"

"Is there anyone who hates you, Mr. Randall?"

"Why, not that I know of. Of course, in my business, you sometimes do things that don't exactly make friends, but you do it for somebody else. There's a crook or two that don't like me any too well, but—well, they couldn't do anything like this. It doesn't make sense. Anybody hate you? Besides Potbury?"

"Not that I know of. And I don't know why he should. Speaking of him, you're going to get some other medical advice, aren't you?"

"Yes. I guess I don't think very fast. I don't know just what to do, except to pick up the phone book and try another number."

"There's a better way. Call one of the big hospitals and ask for an ambulance."

"I'll do that!" Randall said, standing up.

"You might wait until morning. You wouldn't get any useful results until morning, anyway. In the meantime she *might* wake up."

"Well . . . yes, I guess so. I think I'll take another look at her."

"Mr. Randall?"

"Eh?"

"Uh, do you mind if— May I see her?"

Randall looked at him. His suspicions had been lulled more than he had realized by Hoag's manner and words, but the suggestion brought him up short, making him recall Potbury's warnings vividly. "I'd rather you didn't," he said stiffly.

Hoag showed his disappointment but tried to cover it. "Certainly. Certainly. I quite understand, sir."

When Randall returned he was standing near the door with his hat in his hand. "I think I had better go," he said. When Randall did not comment he added, "I would sit with you until morning if you wished it."

"No. Not necessary. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Randall."

When Hoag had gone he wandered around aimlessly for several minutes, his beat ever returning him to the side of his wife. Hoag's comments about Potbury's methods had left him more uneasy than he cared to admit; in addition to that Hoag had, by partly allaying his suspicions of the man, taken from him his emotional whipping boy—which did him no good.

He ate a cold supper and washed it down with beer—and was pleased to find it remained in place. He then dragged a large chair into the bedroom, put a footstool in front of it, got a spare blanket, and prepared to spend the night. There was nothing to do and he did not feel like reading—he tried it and it didn't work. From time to time he got up and obtained a fresh can of beer from the icebox. When the beer was gone he took down the rye. The stuff seemed to quiet his nerves a little, but otherwise he could detect no effect from it. He did not want to become drunk.

He woke with a terrified start, convinced for the moment that Phipps was at the mirror and about to kidnap Cynthia. The room was dark; his heart felt as if it would burst his ribs before he could find the switch and assure himself that it was not so, that his beloved, waxy pale, still lay on the bed.

He had to examine the big mirror and assure himself that it did reflect the room and not act as a window to some other, awful place before he was willing to snap off the light. By the dim reflected light of the city he poured himself a bracer for his shaken nerves.

He thought that he caught a movement in the mirror, whirled around, and found that it was his own reflection. He sat down again and stretched himself out, resolving not to drop off to sleep again.

What was that?

He dashed into the kitchen in pursuit of it. Nothing—nothing that he could find. Another surge of panic swept him back into the bedroom—it could have been a ruse to get him away from her side.

They were laughing at him, goading him, trying to get him to make a false move. He *knew* it—they had been plotting against him for days, trying to shake his nerve. They watched him out of every mirror in the house, ducking back when he tried to catch them at it. The Sons of the Bird—

"The Bird is Cruel!"

Had he said that? Had someone shouted it at him? The Bird is Cruel. Panting for breath, he went to the open window of the bedroom and looked out. It was still dark, pitch-dark. No one moved on the streets below. The direction of the lake was a lowering bank of mist. What time was it? Six o'clock in the morning by the clock on the table. Didn't it *ever* get light in this God-forsaken city?

The Sons of the Bird. He suddenly felt very sly; they thought they had him, but he would fool them—they couldn't do this to him and to Cynthia. He would smash every mirror in the place. He hurried out to the kitchen, where he kept a hammer in the catch-all drawer. He got it and came back to the bedroom. First, the big mirror—

He hesitated just as he was about to swing on it. Cynthia wouldn't like this—seven years bad luck! He wasn't superstitious himself, but—Cynthia wouldn't like it! He turned to the bed with the idea of explaining it to her; it seemed so obvious—just break the mirrors and then they would be safe from the Sons of the Bird.

But he was stumped by her still face.

He thought of a way around it. They had to use a mirror. What was a mirror? A piece of glass that reflects. Very well—fix 'em so they wouldn't reflect! Furthermore he knew how he could do it; in the same drawer with the hammer were three or four dime-store cans of enamel, and a small brush, left-overs from a splurge of furniture refinishing Cynthia had once indulged in.

He dumped them all into a small mixing bowl; together they constituted perhaps a pint of heavy pigment—enough, he thought, for his purpose. He attacked the big beveled glass first, slapping enamel over it in quick careless strokes. It ran down his wrists and dripped onto the dressing table; he did not care. Then the others—

There was enough, though barely enough, to finish the living-room mirror. No matter—it was the last mirror in the house—except, of course, the tiny mirrors in Cynthia's bags and purses, and he had already decided that they did not count. Too small for a man to crawl through and packed away out of sight, anyhow.

The enamel had been mixed from a small amount of black and perhaps a can and a half, net, of red. It was all over his hands now; he looked like the central figure in an ax murder. No matter—he wiped it, or most of it, off on a towel and went back to his chair and his bottle.

Let 'em try now! Let 'em try their dirty, filthy black magic! He had them stymied.

He prepared to wait for the dawn.

The sound of the buzzer brought him up out of his chair, much disorganized, but convinced that he had not closed his eyes. Cynthia was all right—that is to say, she was still asleep, which was the best he had expected. He rolled up his tube and reassured himself with the sound of her heart.

The buzzing continued—or resumed; he did not know which. Automatically he answered it.

"Potbury," came a voice. "What's the matter? You asleep? How's the patient?"

"No change, doctor," he answered, striving to control his voice.

"That so? Well, let me in."

Potbury brushed on by him when he opened the door and went directly to Cynthia. He leaned over her for a moment or two, then straightened up. "Seems about the same," he said. "Can't expect much change for a day or so. Crisis about Wednesday, maybe." He looked Randall over curiously. "What in the world have you been doing? You look like a four-day bender."

"Nothing," said Randall. "Why didn't you have me send her to a hospital, doctor?"

"Worst thing you could do for her."

"What do you know about it? You haven't really examined her. You don't know what's wrong with her. *Do you?*"

"Are you crazy? I told you yesterday."

Randall shook his head. "Just double talk. You're trying to kid me about her. And I want to know why."

Potbury took a step toward him. "You *are* crazy—and drunk, too." He looked curiously at the big mirror. "*I* want to know what's been going on around here." He touched a finger to smeared enamel.

"Don't touch it!"

Potbury checked himself. "What's it for?"

Randall looked sly. "I foxed 'em."

"Who?"

"The Sons of the Bird. They come in through mirrors—but I stopped them."

Potbury stared at him. "I know them," Randall said. "They won't fool me again. The Bird is Cruel."

Potbury covered his face with his hands.

They both stood perfectly still for several sec-

onds. It took that long for a new idea to percolate through Randall's abused and bemused mind. When it did he kicked Potbury in the crotch. The events of the next few seconds were rather confused. Potbury made no outcry, but fought back. Randall made no attempt to fight fair, but followed up his first panzer stroke with more dirty work.

When matters straightened out, Putbury was behind the bathroom door, whereas Randall was on the bedroom side with the key in his pocket. He was breathing hard but completely unaware of such minor damage as he had suffered.

Cynthia slept on.

"Mr. Randall—let me out of here!"

Randall had returned to his chair and was trying to think his way out of his predicament. He was fully sobered by now and made no attempt on consult the bottle. He was trying to get it through his head that there really were "Sons of the Bird" and that he had one of them locked up in there right now.

In that case Cynthia was unconscious because —God help them!—the Sons had stolen her soul. Devils—they had fallen afoul of devils.

Potbury pounded on the door. "What's the meaning of this, Mr. Randall? Have you lost your mind? Let me out of here!"

"What'll you do if I do? Will you bring Cynthia back to life?"

"I'll do what a physician can for her. Why did you do it?"

"You know why. Why did you cover your face?"

"What do you mean? I started to sneeze and you kicked me."

"Maybe I should have said, *'Gesundheit!'* You're a devil, Potbury. You're a Son of the Bird!"

There was a short silence. "What nonsense is this?"

Randall thought about it. Maybe it was nonsense; maybe Potbury *had* been about to sneeze. No! This was the only explanation that made sense. Devils, devils and black magic. Stoles and Phipps and Potbury and the others.

Hoag? That would account for—wait a minute, now. Potbury hated Hoag. Stoles hated Hoag. All the Sons of the Bird hated Hoag. Very well, devil or whatever, he and Hoag were on the same side.

Potbury was pounding on the door again, no longer with his fists, but with a heavier, less frequent blow which meant the shoulder with the whole weight of the body behind it. The door was no stronger than interior house doors usually are; it was evident that it could take little of such treatment.

Randall pounded on his side. "Potbury! Potbury! Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what I'm going to do now? I'm going to call up Hoag and get him to come over here. Do you hear that, Potbury? He'll kill you, Potbury, he'll kill you!"

There was no answer, but presently the heavy pounding resumed. Randall got his gun. "Potbury!" No answer. "Potbury, cut that out or I'll shoot." The pounding did not even slacken.

Randall had a sudden inspiration. "Potbury —*in the Name of the Bird*—get away from that door!"

The noise stopped as if chopped off.

Randall listened and then pursued his advantage. "In the Name of the Bird, don't touch that door again. Hear me, Potbury?" There was no answer, but the quiet continued.

It was early; Hoag was still at his home. He quite evidently was confused by Randall's incoherent explanations, but he agreed to come over, at once, or a little quicker.

Randall went back into the bedroom and re-

sumed his double vigil. He held his wife's still, cool hand with his left hand; in his right he carried his gun, ready in case the invocation failed to bind. But the pounding was not resumed; there was a deathly silence in both rooms for some minutes. Then Randall heard, or imagined he heard, a faint scraping sibilance from the bathroom—an unaccountable and ominous sound.

He could think of nothing to do about it, so he did nothing. It went on for several minutes and stopped. After that—nothing.

Hoag recoiled at the sight of the gun. "Mr. Randall!"

"Hoag," Randall demanded, "are you a devil?"

"I don't understand you."

"'The Bird is Cruel!'"

Hoag did not cover his face; he simply looked confused and a bit more apprehensive.

"O. K.," decided Randall. "You pass. If you *are* a devil, you're my kind of a devil. Come on—I've got Potbury locked up, and I want you to confront him."

"Me? Why?"

"Because he *is* a devil—a Son of the Bird. And they're afraid of you. Come on!" He urged Hoag into the bedroom, continuing with, "The mistake I made was in not being willing to believe in something when it happened to me. *Those weren't dreams.*" He pounded on the door with the muzzle of the gun. "Potbury! Hoag is here! Do what I want and you *may* get out of it alive."

"What do you want of him?" Hoag said nervously.

"*Her*—of course."

"Oh—" Randall pounded again, then turned to Hoag and whispered, "If I open the door, will you confront him? I'll be right alongside you."

Hoag gulped, looked at Cynthia, and answered, "Of course."

"Here goes."

The bath was empty; it had no window, nor any other reasonable exit, but the means by which Potbury had escaped were evident. The surface of the mirror had been scraped free of enamel, with a razor blade.

They risked the seven years of bad luck and broke the mirror. Had he known how to do so, Randall would have swarmed through and tackled them all; lacking the knowledge it seemed wiser to close the leak.

After that there was nothing to do. They discussed it, over the silent form of Randall's wife, but there was nothing to do. They were not magicians. Hoag went into the living room presently, unwilling to disturb the privacy of Randall's despair but also unwilling to desert him entirely. He looked in on him from time to time. It was on one such occasion that he noticed a small black bag half under the bed and recognized it for what it was—a doctor's kit. He went in and picked it up. "Ed," he asked, "have you looked at this?"

"At what?" Randall looked up with dull eyes, and read the inscription, embossed in well-worn gold letters on the flap:

POTIPHAR T. POTBURY, M. D.

"Huh?"

"He must have left it behind."

"He didn't have a chance to take it." Randall took it from Hoag and opened it—a stethoscope, head forceps, clamps, needles, an assortment of vials in a case, the usual props of a G. P.'s work. There was one prescription bottle as well; Randall took it out and read the prescription. "Hoag, look at this."

POISON!

This Prescription Can Not Be Refilled

Mrs. Randall—take as prescribed

BonTon Cutrate Pharmacy

"Was he trying to poison her?" Hoag suggested.

"I don't think so—that's the usual narcotic warning. But I want to see what it is." He shook it. It seemed empty. He started to break the seal.

"Careful!" Hoag warned.

"I will be." He held it well back from his face to open it, then sniffed it very cautiously. It gave up a fragrance, subtle and infinitely sweet.

"Teddy?" He whirled around, dropping the bottle. It was indeed Cynthia, eyelids fluttering. "Don't promise them anything, Teddy!" She sighed and her eyes closed again.

"'The Bird is Cruel!'" she whispered.

IX.

"Your memory lapses are the key to the whole thing," Randall was insisting. "If we knew what you do in the daytime, if we knew your profession, we would know *why* the Sons of the Bird are out to get you. More than that, we would know how to fight them—for they are obviously afraid of you."

Hoag turned to Cynthia. "What do you think, Mrs. Randall?"

"I think Teddy is right. If I knew enough about hypnotism, we would try that—but I don't, so scopolamine is the next best bet. Are you willing to try it?"

"If you say so, yes."

"Get the kit, Teddy." She jumped down from where she had been perched, on the edge of his desk. He put out a hand to catch her.

"You ought to take it easy, baby," he complained.

"Nonsense, I'm all right—now."

They had adjourned to their business office almost as soon as Cynthia woke up. To put it plainly, they were scared—scared stiff, but not scared silly. The apartment seemed an unhealthy place to be. The office did not seem much better. Randall and Cynthia had decided to *get out of town*—the stop at the office was a penultimate stop, for a conference of war.

Hoag did not know what to do.

"Just forget you ever saw this kit," Randall warned him, as he prepared the hypodermic. "Not being a doctor, nor an anæsthetist, I shouldn't have it. But it's convenient, sometimes." He scrubbed a spot of Hoag's forearm with an alcohol swab. "Steady now—there!" He shoved in the needle.

They waited for the drug to take hold. "What do you expect to get," Randall whispered to Cynthia.

"I don't know. If we're lucky, his two personalities will knit. Then we may find out a lot of things."

A little later Hoag's head sagged forward; he breathed heavily. She stepped forward and shook his shoulder. "Mr. Hoag—do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Jonathan . . . Hoag."

"Where do you live?"

"Six-oh-two—Gotham Apartments."

"What do you do?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Try to remember. What is your profession?"

No answer. She tried again. "Are you a hypnotist?"

"No."

"Are you a—magician?"

The answer was delayed a little, but finally came. "No."

"What are you, Jonathan Hoag?"

He opened his mouth, seemed about to answer—then sat up suddenly, his manner brisk and completely free of the lassitude normal to the drug. "I'm sorry, my dear, but this will have to stop—for the present."

He stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out. "Bad," he said, glancing up and down the street. "How distressingly bad." He seemed to be talking to himself rather than to them. Cynthia and Randall looked at him, then to each other for help.

"What is bad, Mr. Hoag?" Cynthia asked, rather diffidently. She did not have the impression analyzed, but he seemed like another person—younger, more vibrant.

"Eh? Oh, I'm sorry. I owe you an explanation. I was forced to, uh, dispense with the drug."

"Dispense with it?"

"Throw it off, ignore it, make it as nothing. You see, my dear, while you were talking I recalled my profession." He looked at them cheerily, but offered no further explanation.

Randall was the first to recover. "What *is* your profession?"

Hoag smiled at him, almost tenderly. "It wouldn't do to tell you," he said. "Not now, at least." He turned to Cynthia. "My dear, could I trouble you for a pencil and a sheet of paper?"

"Uh—why, certainly." She got them for him; he accepted them graciously and, seating himself, began to write.

When he said nothing to explain his conduct Randall spoke up, "Say, Hoag, look here—" Hoag turned a serene face to him; Randall started to speak, seemed puzzled by what he saw in Hoag's face, and concluded lamely, "Er . . . Mr. Hoag, what's this all about?"

"Are you not willing to trust me?"

Randall chewed his lip for a moment and looked at him; Hoag was patient and serene. "Yes . . . I suppose I am," he said at last.

"Good. I am making a list of some things I want you to buy for me. I shall be quite busy for the next two hours or so."

"You are leaving us?"

"You are worried about the Sons of the Bird, aren't you? Forget them. They will not harm you. I promise it." He resumed writing. Some minutes later he handed the list to Randall. "I've noted at the bottom the place where you are to meet me—a filling station outside Waukegan."

"Waukegan? Why Waukegan?"

"No very important reason. I want to do once more something I am very fond of doing and don't expect to be able to do again. You'll help me, won't you? Some of the things I've asked you to buy may be hard to get, but you will try."

"I suppose so."

"Good." He left at once.

Randall looked from the closing door back to the list in his hand. "Well, I'll be a— Cyn, what do you suppose he wants us to get for him?—groceries!"

"Groceries? Let me see that list."

X.

They were driving north in the outskirts of the city, with Randall at the wheel. Somewhere up ahead lay the place where they were to meet Hoag; behind them under the turtleback of the car were the purchases he had directed them to make.

"Teddy?"

"Yeah, kid."

"Can you make a U-turn here?"

"Sure—if you don't get caught. Why?"

"Because that's just what I'd like to do. Let

me finish," she went on hurriedly. "We've got the car; we've got all the money we have in the world with us; there isn't anything to stop us from heading south if we want to."

"Still thinking of that vacation? But we're going on it—just as soon as we deliver this stuff to Hoag."

"I don't mean a vacation. I mean go away and never come back—now!"

"With eighty dollars' worth of fancy groceries that Hoag ordered and hasn't paid for yet? No soap."

"We could eat them ourselves."

"Humph! Caviar and humming-bird wings. We can't afford it, kid. We're the hamburger type. Anyhow, even if we could, I want to see Hoag again. Some plain talk—and explanations."

She sighed. "That's just what I thought, Teddy, and that's why I want to cut and run. I don't want explanations; I'm satisfied with the world the way it is. Just you and me—and no complications. I don't *want* to know anything about Mr. Hoag's profession—or the Sons of the Bird—or anything like that."

He fumbled for a cigarette, then scratched a match under the instrument board, while looking at her quizzically out the corner of his eye. Fortunately the traffic was light. "I think I feel the same way you do about it, kid, but I've got a different angle on it. If we drop it now, I'll be jumpy about the Sons of the Bird the rest of my life, and scared to shave, for fear of looking in a mirror. But there is a rational explanation for the whole thing—bound to be—and I'm going to get it. Then we can sleep."

She made herself small and did not answer.

"Look at it this way," Randall went on, somewhat irritated. "Everything that has happened could have been done in the ordinary way, without recourse to supernatural agencies. As for supernatural agencies—well, out here in the sunlight and the traffic it's a little too much to swallow. Sons of the Bird—rats!"

She did not answer. He went on, "The first significant point is that Hoag is a consummate actor. Instead of being a prissy little Milquetoast, he's a dominant personality of the first water. Look at the way I shut up and said, 'Yes, sir,' when he pretended to throw off the drug and ordered us to buy all those groceries."

"Pretended?"

"Sure. Somebody substituted colored water for my sleepy juice—probably done the same time the phony warning was stuck in the typewriter. But to get back to the point—he's a naturally strong character and almost certainly a clever hypnotist. Pulling that illusion about the thirteenth floor and Detheridge & Co. shows how skillful he is—or somebody is. Probably used drugs on me as well, just as they did on you."

"On me?"

"Sure. Remember that stuff you drank in Potbury's office? Some sort of a delayed-action Mickey Finn."

"But you drank it, too!"

"Not necessarily the *same* stuff. Potbury and Hoag were in cahoots, which is how they created the atmosphere that made the whole thing possible. Everything else was little stuff, insignificant when taken alone."

Cynthia had her own ideas about that, but she kept them to herself. However, one point bothered her. "How did Potbury get out of the bathroom? You told me he was locked in."

"I've thought about that. He picked the lock while I was phoning Hoag, hid in the closet and just waited his chance to walk out."

"Hm-m-m—" She let it go at that for several minutes; Randall stopped talking, being busy with the traffic in Waukegan. He turned left and headed out of town.

"Teddy—if you are sure that the whole thing was just a hoax and there are no such things as the Sons, then why can't we drop it and head south? We don't need to keep this appointment."

"I'm sure of my explanation all right," he said, skillfully avoiding a suicide-bent boy on a bicycle, "in its broad outlines, but I'm *not* sure of the motivation—and *that's* why I have to see Hoag. Funny thing, though," he continued thoughtfully, "I don't think Hoag has anything against us; I think he had some reasons of his own and paid us five hundred berries to put up with some discomfort while he carried out his plans. But we'll see. Anyhow, it's too late to turn back; there's the filling station he mentioned—and there's Hoag!"

Hoag climbed in with no more than a nod and a smile; Randall felt again the compulsion to do as he was told which had first hit him some two hours before. Hoag told him where to go.

The way lay out in the country and, presently, off the pavement. In due course they came to a farm gate leading into pasture land, which Hoag instructed Randall to open and drive through. "The owner does not mind," he said. "I've been here many times, on my Wednesdays. A beautiful spot."

It *was* a beautiful spot. The road, a wagon track now, led up a gradual rise to a tree-topped crest. Hoag had him park under a tree, and they got out. Cynthia stood for a moment, drinking it in, and savoring deep breaths of the clean air. To the south Chicago could be seen and beyond it and east of it a silver gleam of the lake. "Teddy, isn't it gorgeous?"

"It is," he admitted, but turned to Hoag. "What I want to know is—why are we here?"

"Picnic," said Hoag. "I chose this spot for my finale."

"Finale?"

"Food first," said Hoag. "Then, if you must, we'll talk."

It was a very odd menu for a picnic; in place of hearty foods there were some dozens of gourmets' specialties—preserved cumquats, guava jelly, little potted meats, tea—made by Hoag over a spirit lamp—delicate wafers with a famous name on the package. In spite of this both Randall and Cynthia found themselves eating heartily. Hoag tried everything, never passing up a dish—but Cynthia noticed that he actually ate very little, tasting rather than dining.

In due course Randall got his courage up to brace Hoag; it was beginning to appear that Hoag had no intention of broaching the matter himself. "Hoag?"

"Yes, Ed?"

"Isn't it about time you took off the false face and quit kidding us?"

"I have not kidded you, my friend."

"You know what I mean—this whole rat race that has been going on the past few days. You're mixed up in it and know more about it than we do—that's evident. Mind you, not that I'm accusing you of anything," he added hastily. "But I want to know what it means."

"Ask yourself what it means."

"O. K.," Randall accepted the challenge, "I will." He launched into the explanation which he had sketched out to Cynthia. Hoag encouraged him to continue it fully, but, when he was through, said nothing.

"Well," Randall said nervously, "that's how it happened—wasn't it?"

"It seems like a good explanation."

"I thought so. But you've still got to clear some things up. Why did you do it?"

Hoag shook his head thoughtfully. "I'm sorry, Ed. I cannot possibly explain my motives to you."

"But, damn it, that's not fair! The least you could—"

"When did you ever find fairness, Edward?"

"Well—I expected you to play fair with us. You encouraged us to treat you as a friend. You owe us explanations."

"I promised you explanations. But consider, Ed—do you want explanations? I assure you that you will have no more trouble, no more visitations from the Sons."

Cynthia touched his arm. "Don't ask for them, Teddy!"

He brushed her off, not unkindly but decisively. "I've got to *know*. Let's have the explanation."

"You won't like it."

"I'll chance it."

"Very well." Hoag settled back. "Will you serve the wine, my dear? Thank you. I shall have to tell you a little story first. It will be partly allegorical, as there are not the . . . the words, the concepts. Once there was a race, quite unlike the human race—quite. I have no way of describing to you what they looked like or how they lived, but they had one characteristic you can understand: they were creative. The creating and enjoying of works of art was their occupation and their reason for being. I say 'art' advisedly, for art is undefined, undefinable, and without limits. I can use the word without fear of misusing it, for it has no exact meaning. There are as many meanings as there are artists. But remember that these artists are not human and their art is not human.

"Think of one of this race, in your terms—young. He creates a work of art, under the eye and the guidance of his teacher. He has talent, this one, and his creation has many curious and amusing features. The teacher encourages him to go on with it and prepare it for the judging. Mind you, I am speaking in metaphorical terms, as if this were a human artist, preparing his canvases to be judged in the annual showing."

He stopped, and said suddenly to Randall, "Are you a religious man? Did it ever occur to you that all this"—he included the whole quietly beautiful countryside in the sweep of his arm—"might have had a Creator? *Must* have had a Creator?"

Randall stared and turned red. "I'm not exactly a churchgoing man," he blurted, "but— Yes, I suppose I do believe it."

"And you, Cynthia?"

She nodded, tense and speechless.

"The Artist created this world, after His Own fashion and using postulates which seemed well to Him. His teacher approved on the whole, but—"

"Wait a minute," Randall said insistently. "Are you trying to describe the creation of the world—the Universe?"

"What else?"

"But—damn it, this is preposterous! I asked for an explanation of the things that have just happened to *us*."

"I told you that you would not like the explanation." He waited for a moment, then continued, "The Sons of the Bird were the dominant feature of the world, at first."

Randall listened to him, feeling that his head would burst. He knew, with sick horror, that the rationalization he had made up on the way to the

rendezvous had been sheerest moonshine, thrown together to still the fears that had overcome him. The Sons of the Bird—real, real and horrible—and potent. He felt that he knew now the sort of race of which Hoag spoke. From Cynthia's tense and horrified face *she* knew, also—and there would never again be peace for either of them. "In the Beginning there was the Bird—"

Hoag looked at him with eyes free of malice but without pity. "No," he said serenely, "there was never the Bird. They who call themselves Sons of the Bird there are. But they are stupid and arrogant. Their sacred story is so much superstition. But in their way and by the rules of this world they are powerful. The things, Edward, that you thought you saw you did see."

"You mean that—"

"Wait, let me finish. I must hasten. You saw what you thought you saw, with one exception. Until today you have seen *me* only in your apartment, or mine. The creatures you shadowed, the creature that frightened Cynthia—Sons of the Bird, all of them. Stoles and his friends.

"The teacher did not approve of the Sons of the Bird and suggested certain improvements in the creation. But the Artist was hasty or careless; instead of removing them entirely He merely —painted over them, made them appear to be some of the new creations with which He peopled His world.

"All of which might not have mattered if the work had not been selected for judging. Inevitably the critics noticed them; they were—bad art, and they disfigured the final work. There was some doubt in their minds as to whether or not the creation was worth preserving. That is why I am here."

He stopped, as if there were no more to say. Cynthia looked at him fearfully. "Are you . . . are you—"

He smiled at her. "No, Cynthia, I am not the Creator of your world. You asked me my profession once.

"I am an art critic."

Randall would like to have disbelieved. It was impossible for him to do so; the truth rang in his ears and would not be denied. Hoag continued, "I said to you that I would have to speak to you in terms you use. You must know that to judge a creation such as this, your world, is not like walking up to a painting and looking at it. This world is peopled with *men;* it must be looked at through the eyes of men. I am a man."

Cynthia looked still more troubled. "I don't understand. You act through the body of a man?"

"I *am* a man. Scattered around through the human race are the Critics—men. Each is the projection of a Critic, but each is a man—in every way a man, not knowing that he is also a Critic."

Randall seized on the discrepancy as if his reason depended on it—which, perhaps, it did. "But *you* know—or say you do. It's a contradiction."

Hoag nodded, undisturbed. "Until today, when Cynthia's questioning made it inconvenient to continue as I was—and for other reasons—this *persona*"—he tapped his chest—"had no idea of why he was here. He was a man, and no more. Even now, I have extended my present *persona* only as far as is necessary for my purpose. There are questions which I could not answer—as Jonathan Hoag.

"Jonathan Hoag came into being, as a man, for the purpose of examining, *savoring,* certain of the artistic aspects of this world. In the course of that it became convenient to use him to smell out some of the activities of those discarded and painted-over creatures that call themselves the Sons of the Bird. You two happened to be drawn into the activity—innocent and unknowing, like the pigeons used by armies. But it so happened that I observed something else of artistic worth while in contact with you, which is why we are taking the trouble for these explanations."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me speak first of the matters I observed as a critic. Your world has several pleasures. There is eating." He reached out and pulled off from its bunch a muscat grape, fat and sugar-sweet, and ate it appreciatively. "An odd one, that. And very remarkable. No one ever before thought of making an art of the simple business of obtaining the necessary energy. Your Artist has very real talent.

"And there is sleeping. A strange reflexive business in which the Artist's own creations are allowed to create more worlds of their own. You see now, don't you," he said, smiling, "why the critic must be a *man* in truth—else he could not dream as a man does?

"There is drinking—which mixes both eating and dreaming.

"There is the exquisite pleasure of conversing together, friend with friend, as we are doing. That is not new, but it goes to the credit of the Artist that He included it.

"And there is sex. Sex is ridiculous. As a critic I would have disregarded it entirely had not you, my friends, let me see something which had not come to the attention of Jonathan Hoag, something which, in my own artistic creations, I had never had the wit to invent. As I said, your Artist has talent." He looked at them almost tenderly. "Tell me, Cynthia, what do you love in this world and what is it that you hate and fear?"

She made no attempt to answer him, but crept closer to her husband. Randall put a protecting arm around her. Hoag spoke then to Randall. "And you, Edward? Is there something in this world for which you'd surrender your life and your soul, if need be? You need not answer—I saw in your face and in your heart, last night, as you bent over the bed. Good art, good art—both of you. I have found several sorts of good and original art in this world, enough to justify encouraging your Artist to try again. But there was so much that was bad, poorly drawn and amateurish, that I could not find it in me to approve the work as a whole until I encountered and savored this, the tragedy of human love!"

Cynthia looked at him wildly. "Tragedy? You say 'tragedy'?"

He looked at her with eyes that were not pitying, but serenely appreciative. "What else could it be, my dear?"

She stared at him, then turned and buried her face on the lapel of her husband's coat. Randall patted her head. "Stop it, Hoag!" he said savagely. "You've frightened her again."

"I did not wish to."

"You have. And I can tell you what I think of your story. It's got holes in it you can throw a cat through. You made it up."

"You do not believe that."

It was true; Randall did not. But he went on bravely, his hand still soothing his wife. "The stuff under your nails—how about that? I notice you left that out. And your fingerprints."

"The stuff under my nails has little to do with the story. It served its purpose, which was to make fearful the Sons of the Bird. They knew what it was."

"But what was it?"

"The ichor of the Sons—planted there by my other *persona*. But what is this about fingerprints? Jonathan Hoag was honestly fearful of having them taken; Jonathan Hoag is a man, Edward. You must remember that."

Randall told him; Hoag nodded. "I see. Truthfully I do not recall it, even today, although my full *persona* knows of it. Jonathan Hoag had a nervous habit of polishing things with his handkerchief; perhaps he polished the arm of your chair."

"I don't remember it."

"Nor do I."

Randall took up the fight again. "That isn't all and that isn't half of it. What about the rest home you said you were in? And who pays you? Where do you get your money? Why was Cynthia always so darned scared of you?"

Hoag looked out toward the city; a fog was rolling in from the lake. "There is little time for these things," he said, "and it does not matter, even to you, whether you believe or not. But you do believe—you cannot help it. But you have brought up another matter. Here." He pulled a thick roll of bills from his pocket and handed them to Randall. "You might as well take them with you; I shall have no more use for them. I shall be leaving you in a few minutes."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to myself. After I leave, you must do this: Get into your car and drive at once, south, through the city. *Under no circumstances* open a window of your car until you are miles away from the city."

"Why? I don't like this."

"Nevertheless, do it. There will be certain—changes, readjustments going on."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you, did I not, that the Sons of the Bird

are being dealt with? They, and all their works."

"How?"

Hoag did not answer, but stared again at the fog. It was creeping up on the city. "I think I must go now. Do as I have told you to do." He started to turn away. Cynthia lifted up her face and spoke to him.

"Don't go! Not yet."

"Yes, my dear?"

"You must tell me one thing: *Will Teddy and I be together?*"

He looked into her eyes and said, "I see what you mean. I don't know."

"But you *must* know!"

"I do not know. If you are both creatures of this world, then your patterns may run alike. But there are the Critics, you know."

"The Critics? What have *they* to do with *us?*"

"One, or the other, or both of you may *be* Critics. I would not know. Remember, the Critics are men—here. I did not even know myself as one until today." He looked at Randall meditatively. "*He* may be one. I suspected it once today."

"Am—I?"

"I have no way of knowing. It is most unlikely. You see, we can't know each other, for it would spoil our artistic judgment."

"But . . . but . . . if we *are* not the same, then—"

"That is all." He said it, not emphatically, but with such a sound of finality that they were both startled. He bent over the remains of the feast and selected one more grape, ate it, and closed his eyes.

He did not open them. Presently Randall said, "Mr. Hoag?" No answer. "Mr. Hoag!" Still no answer. He separated himself from Cynthia, stood up, and went around to where the quiet figure sat. He shook him. "Mr. Hoag!"

"But we can't just leave him there!" Randall insisted, some minutes later.

"Teddy, he knew what he was doing. The thing for us to do is to follow his instructions."

"Well—we can stop in Waukegan and notify the police."

"Tell them we left a dead man back there on a hillside? Do you think they would say, 'Fine,' and let us drive on? No, Teddy—just what he told us to do."

"Honey—you don't believe all that stuff he was telling us, do you?"

She looked him in the eyes, her own eyes welling with tears, and said, "Do you? Be honest with me, Teddy."

He met her gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes and said, "Oh, never mind! We'll do what he said. Get in the car."

The fog which appeared to have engulfed the city was not visible when they got down the hill and had started back toward Waukegan, nor did they see it again after they had turned south and drove toward the city. The day was bright and sunny, as it had started to be that morning, with just enough nip in the air to make Hoag's injunction about keeping the windows rolled up tight seem like good sense.

They took the lake route south, skipping the Loop thereby, with the intention of continuing due south until well out of the city. The traffic had thickened somewhat over what it had been when they started out in the middle of the morning; Randall was forced to give his attention to the wheel. Neither of them felt like talking and it gave an excuse not to.

They had left the Loop area behind them when Randall spoke up, "Cynthia—"

"Yes."

"We ought to tell somebody. I'm going to ask the next cop we see to call the Waukegan station."

"Teddy!"

"Don't worry. I'll give him some stall that will make them investigate without making them suspicious of us. The old run-around—you know."

She knew his powers of invention were fertile enough to do such a job; she protested no more. A few blocks later Randall saw a patrolman standing on the sidewalk, warming himself in the sun, and watching some boys playing sand-lot football. He pulled up to the curb beside him. "Run down the window, Cyn."

She complied, then gave a sharp intake of breath and swallowed a scream. He did not scream, but he wanted to.

Outside the open window was no sunlight, no cops, no kids—nothing. Nothing but a gray and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. They could see nothing of the city through it, not because it was too dense but because it was—empty. No sound came out of it; no movement showed in it.

It merged with the frame of the window and began to drift inside. Randall shouted, "Roll up the window!" She tried to obey, but her hands were nerveless; he reached across her and cranked it up himself, jamming it hard into its seat.

The sunny scene was restored; through the glass they saw the patrolman, the boisterous game, the sidewalk, and the city beyond. Cynthia put a hand on his arm. "Drive on, Teddy!"

"Wait a minute," he said tensely, and turned to the window beside him. Very cautiously he rolled it down—just a crack, less than an inch.

It was enough. The formless gray flux was out there, too; through the glass the city traffic and sunny street were plain, through the opening—nothing.

"Drive on, Teddy—*please!*"

She need not have urged him; he was already letting in the clutch with a jerk.

* * * *

Their house is not exactly on the Gulf, but the water can be seen from the hilltop near it. The village where they do their shopping has only eight hundred people in it, but it seems to be enough for them. They do not care much for company, anyway, except their own. They get a lot of that. When he goes out to the vegetable patch, or to the fields, she goes along, taking with her such woman's work as she can carry and do in her lap. If they go to town, they go together, hand in hand—always.

He wears a beard, but it is not so much a peculiarity as a necessity, for there is not a mirror in the entire house. They do have one peculiarity which would mark them as odd in any community, if anyone knew about it, but it is of such a nature that no one else *would* know.

When they go to bed at night, before he turns out the light, he handcuffs one of his wrists to one of hers.

THE END.

THE FROG

By P. Schuyler Miller

●Being the assistant to a wily old magician was a profitable thing—it gave Shagsu ideas. Trying to displace a wily old magician though—was not at all a wise thing for him—

Illustrated by Kolliker

In our time educators are wont to point despairingly at certain precocious infants who seem from the moment of their birth foredoomed to damnation.

These are the bespectacled, spindled-shanked minikins who squat behind a fern in a corner of the kindergarten poring over Freud and "The Decline of the West" while their classmates are making glorious messes with red paint or working off their latent atavisms on the jungle gym. A little later their lives become a battle ground between the fond parents who maintain with a certain amount of logic that a working knowledge of semantics and a smattering of non-Euclidian geometry is wasted on the fourth grade, and the harassed pedagogues who insist with equal vehemence that a nine-year-old who is plopped down in the middle of a world of gleefully rutting adolescents, with no more armor than a set of the "Britannica," is physically and socially as much out of place as he would be in the company of Dr. Doolittle and short division.

The trouble, you see, is that such children never grow up. Jammed posthaste through tutors and private schools to keep pace with their fevered brains, they by-pass all the normal, leisurely exploration of life which is the prerogative of childhood. They may have read about life, but they have never lived it.

Being children, they look on the world with a child's eyes and deal with it with a child's naïve curiosity. They marry, and the cold, pragmatic cruelty of childhood finds an outlet in tormenting their slower-witted mates to the edge of suicide or divorce. They are the brief, bright poets who sing in jagged meter in the "little" magazines and die of dope, TB, and malnutrition in a back bedroom. They are the "advanced" artists who splash raw paint to no avail unless Fate happens to give them a nudge, in which case they become the season's vogue and drink themselves to death at thirty. They are the long-haired parlor pinks who screech Utopia from the street corners with no real notion of the world they are in. A few lucky ones bury themselves contentedly in one or another of our older universities or slip into a rare berth in some laboratory where the production department and the publicity office do not dictate the advance of pure science. A very few learn the happy technique of solidifying dreams and are wafted away into a blissful oblivion.

But that is today, and my story goes back to a past which no one has ever tried to date, to a

city which no archaeologist has ever seen, and to an infant prodigy who lived in an age where—up to a certain point—anything went.

The youth we are talking about was named Shem-abba—which probably meant something sweet and sticky like "honey-flower-of-the-date-palm" to his mother—but by the time we meet him he was pretty generally known as Shagsu, which is less pleasantly interpreted. He was a scrawny runt of fifteen—which made him a man in those days and in that climate—with a nasty dexterity with the long bronze knife he kept up one sleeve. He was no good at the usual manly arts, though his first act when he was settled in the new job was to grow himself a straggling, wispy sort of beard and acquire a slim, timid-looking wife and a string of more flamboyant concubines, but until he was apprenticed to the sorcerer, Khem-dag, the knife and his coldly impersonal way of using it had made him feared by some and heartily disliked by all.

Khem-dag was an old man and a rich one, and he had seen something in Shagsu which appealed to his slimy old soul. On the day he first saw the boy's pinched dirty face and swollen skull bobbing along an alley, bent on dogged vengeance for some imagined slight, he knew he had found an ideal apprentice. He was not mistaken.

The boy went through the preliminaries like a racing camel, and added a few curious and experimental touches of his own to certain philters which caused Khem-dag's trade in such small magic to boom overnight. By the time he had been in the old magician's employ a week he had made himself gold enough to buy the daughter of the richest man in the city for a wife. He never beat her. He was not so crude. But he soon discovered exquisite little ways of making life unpleasant for her, when she had displeased him or simply when he was bored, and from then on his ingenuity knew no bounds. The concubines came in for their share of it, too, but they were of coarser stuff in the first place, and in the second there was no one to ask questions about them if he happened to push matters a little too far. Allil was his first wife, the woman of his house, and beyond a certain point he would have been overstepping the bounds of good taste. For a man of his standing that was out of the question. But that is not our story—

Khem-dag was old—how old no one knew—and he had had experience with such as Shem-abba. He trod carefully and revealed no more than need be. He snickered in his stained old beard when he learned that the little Shem-abba was now known on the roof tops as Shagsu—"dog butcher"—because he knew just how far from the truth the malicious title came. Nevertheless he slipped out by night and buried certain scrolls and clay tablets in archaic cuneiform which might be too advanced for the boy's green intellect to cope with. He did not know that Shagsu was watching him in a pool of ink, or that the greater part of what was in those scrolls was already implanted indelibly in the young devil's agile memory.

There is a part of magic which is purely chemistry and physics with a garnish of common sense, plus enough psychology to make the stuff jell. Shagsu went through that part in no time, and there, he found, old Khem-dag intended to let him stop for the time being. His adolescent's curiosity was aroused and his overweening conceit was bruised a little, and before long, by one means or another, he managed to trick the old man into revealing such other morsels as the business of the ink pool and the calling up of minor demons—but there it stopped. And there, he knew, the real body of magic began.

Just about there, too, Khem-dag began to realize what kind of monstrosity he had taken into his business. The old man could never have come close to the boy's sheer intelligence, but a very long lifetime of practical experience had made him one of the most capable journeymen magicians in that part of the world, and he saw no reason to doubt his ability to handle the situation. Besides, the natural cussedness which seems to be an important part of most successful sorcerers prevented him from stopping things before he had made the little viper squirm.

Unfortunately, as we have noted, Shagsu knew where the old man had buried his books and had promptly dug them up, replacing them with reasonably accurate facsimiles, magically produced. Khem-dag discovered the counterfeit the next time he had occasion to look up a difficult spell, and took steps to retrieve them immediately, but he reckoned without Shagsu's completely photographic memory. He knew every word that was in those books—but that was all he did know.

It took mankind a good many thousand years to hit on the idea of writing, and several thousand more to reach even a semisatisfactory scheme of spelling. Phonetics didn't even exist. And inasmuch as a magician's stock in trade, when he came to the really big stuff, lay as much in the way he said things as in what he said, Shagsu was not going to get very far until he knew how to pronounce the words of the spells he had learned, or the rhythm with which they were to be spoken.

He found that out in no time, of course, and it soured him completely. He put a chip on his shoulder and took his pet out on anyone smaller or weaker than himself, until Khem-dag had to put his foot down on the grounds that it was hurting business. After that he restricted his tempers to his wife and the concubines, but one

of them ran away, and before she had been caught and quieted Khem-dag got wind of what she had been babbling. It gave him to think, and he did think.

Shagsu was puttering over a not-too-quick poison which the captain of the king's guard wanted for an unfaithful wife when he sensed eyes on him. The room was empty and too small to have anything bigger than a mouse hidden in it, so with the naïve directness of his tender years he looked for mice instead of secret panels or television. He found one at once, squatting on its haunches in a corner, staring at him insolently and a bit malevolently. He considered crunching it under his heel, but thought better of that when he remembered the technique of some of the spells he had read in his master's books. He spat at it pettishly and turned his back on it, and after a little it went away.

For several days, then, there were eyes on him: mice's eyes, dogs' eyes, camels' eyes—it made him jittery and sullen. He suspected, rightly, that Khem-dag was watching him through those assorted eyes, but there was no way of doing anything about it without giving away his hand. So he made other plans.

He had those plans in mind the morning that Khem-dag sent for him and outlined the job he had for him. Shagsu smiled a smug, adolescent smile in his new beard as he thought of how neatly the old fool had stepped into his trap.

The city of their fathers was old, as we look at age, but there had been cities before it, and cities before them. Magic, to a certain extent, involved knowing about such things and what might come of them.

The desert had been a fertile steppe when those older cities were built, and dry ravines had been flowering bowers watered by crystal springs. The mud of those springs was dry now, caked and blackened by the desert sun. The temples of mud brick that had stood beside them were roofless, their walls crumbled and the altars of the old gods broken. But there was power in them yet.

The people of the springs had been a water people, driven inland somewhere in the mists of the past when their kin were building huts of bulrushes in Shinar's swamps before the days of the kings of Ur. The peeling frescoes on their temple walls were water scenes, and their gods had been water gods. In particular, a god of theirs had been a god of frogs.

Now frogs, from of old, have had a particular fascination for sorcerers. How such associations form I have no way of knowing—I doubt, really, that there is anything intrinsically magical about

frogs—but when the prayers and curses of a numerous people have been intimately concerned with frogs throughout the lifetime of a civilization—when all the little twists and tricks of sorcery have centered around them for as long as men can remember—then something happens which is not quite what the eye sees. Shagsu knew that, and he knew more.

Khem-dag's mission was, on the face of it, the kind of thing any street urchin might have done. It irked Shagsu a bit that the magician had unloaded it on him, but at the same time it suited his own purposes admirably. He was to go at dawn to a certain ruined temple beside a certain ancient spring, and from it take a certain small image of greenish steatite—the idol of the frog-god whose temple it had been. He was to bring it back, treat it with certain complexly compounded unguents, and serve it up on a copper salver to his master at the stroke of midnight. That part, he knew, was so much poppycock—the old man liked to be mysterious—but the rest undoubtedly had its purpose, and he meant to discover what that purpose was before the night was out.

The image was there, exactly as Khem-dag had said, nor was there any reason to think that it wouldn't be. The old man was usually right about such things. It was as ugly as sin—crudely shaped and imperfectly finished in spite of the softness of the stone, save on its grinning mouth where the fingers of countless long-dead priests had left the thick black polish of their greasy skins. He dropped it into his pouch, and with a brief word to a minor elemental who could cast a cloud of obscurity about the place and effectively block any spying with ink bowls or suchlike paraphernalia, he set about his personal business.

In the courtyard of the little temple, directly in front of the niche where the idol had squatted, there had been a little pool, probably once planted with rushes and other plants if the mangy friezes in the temple spoke the truth, into which had bubbled the waters of the sacred spring. As the continental rain belts shifted over Asia at the passing of the Great Ice, the pool dried and its rich, deep mud lay in warped and blackened blocks amid the dust of the courtyard. There, Shagsu knew, was what he was looking for.

The sun-baked mud came away easily in big chunks, almost as hard as stone, and he soon had a pile beside him in the shadow of the ruined wall. As he cleared it, the little pool was revealed as a burnished basin of green obsidian, polished to mirror smoothness. The spring had spouted out of a finger-wide hole, high on one side, and run out through a copper conduit on the other. It was a good ten feet across and half as deep. It was too big to carry off by any normal means, but Shagsu gave consideration to the idea. It should have cash value as a curio if it had no special value to the trade. Its steeply sloping sides were as slick as glass, and he had some difficulty in getting out when he clambered down into it to get the last lumps of mud.

He sat down in the shade with his little pile of mud bricks and a greenstone mace which had been in the niche beside the image of the frog-god. As an afterthought he took the little idol out of his pouch and set it in the sun in front of him, where he could study its ugly shape and ponder on its possible uses as he thumped diligently at the chunks of baked mud. Any value it might have for old Khem-dag would be doubled for him, if he knew what it was.

What he did not know was what had set him gathering mud. Presently his efforts were rewarded—out of a hollow in the hard-baked clay tumbled the mummy of a frog—black, shriveled, rolled into a tight ball with its paws clasped over its eyes and nostrils. He dropped it into the saddlebag of his donkey and went on with his work. The spell he had in mind was one which had worked well with a modern frog and the husband of a certain Egyptian woman, and he had every reason to believe that it would be even more potent when worked with sacred frogs that had been sealed up for more centuries than mattered, even on so well protected an individual as Khem-dag.

There were ten of the things. By the time he had broken out the last one, the first he had released were stirring in the sack. How long they had lain embalmed in mud not even Khem-dag knew—a thousand years or five thousand—but they had survived it nobly. He picked up the smallest of them and let it struggle out of his fist and hop feebly out into the sun. He squatted on his heels, brown elbows on his bare knees, watching it squirm and shrivel under the fierce rays, and when it sought the shade of the ruined wall he poked it back with the point of his dagger and let it sizzle a little longer. It died quickly, and when he picked it up it was as dry and flat and hard as if it had been dead for all the thousands of years since the green bowl of the temple pool was filled with running water and the air was holy with the croaking of the sacred frogs.

He put it away in a fold of his robe. Dead frogs had their uses, too.

The heat of the day made him drowsy. He hunched back against the wall and watched the idol of the frog-god, frying in the sun at his feet. The grease of its ancient libations was sweating out of the gray-green stone, but it sat there helpless, a carved lump, staring back at him with bulging, sightless eyes. A god! He spat at it contemptuously.

Eyes half closed, he thought of the things he might do, now that he had the frogs. Men's souls could be exchanged with those of frogs, and they would go hopping about their homes, croaking and snapping at flies, while their real selves dwelt miserably in the body of the batrachian. But that was a trick that any fool could work, and it stopped when the frog died.

He thought of the spell he had cast on the Egyptian, and which he intended to place on Khem-dag before many hours had passed. It was an exquisitely humorous spell to fall on anyone who prided himself on the proud eminence of man. Through it man and frog slipped together back down the ladder of their lives, the frog dwindling to a gilled tadpole, to a jelly-covered egg, while the man followed it into crack-voiced adolescence, into wambling childhood, back to the speck of pulp in which he had been conceived. A man would usually talk fluently long before he reached puling infancy—Khem-dag would talk, he thought. And there was a great deal that the old man could say, if only he could be persuaded.

Shagsu straightened with a jerk, and his boy's eyes narrowed. His dirty fingers closed over the amulet he had worn from birth. Was this some of Khem-dag's trickery? He could swear that the image of the frog-god had moved.

It sat there in the blazing sun in a little puddle of oil that had sweated out of the pores of the soft soapstone. It looked fatter than he remembered; its bulging eyes were blacker and brighter. As he stared one stumpy forepaw thrust out and the flat gray body crawled forward toward the narrow strip of shade along the wall.

Frog-god! The coarse hair bristled on his spine. Those old worshipers had endowed the

idol with something more than the shape of a frog, stone though it was. Their prayers had put a kind of frog life into it, and the power they believed it held. That was why Khem-dag wanted it. That was the reason he had been sent here to get it. The power of frogs was great, but the power of a god of frogs—

He reached for the saddlebag. Frogs! Their magic was puny against the power in his grasp now. Let Khem-dag beware! He spilled them out on the baked white clay of the courtyard. They were dead—dead and shrunken like shadows of frogs, black in the white sunlight.

He considered that. Living representatives of the frog-god, it was not unreasonable that their lives should have been drawn into it, that their magic, which he had hoped to use, had been taken by the god-thing to release its image from the torture of the sun. He leaned forward suddenly and flipped the little idol over on its back. The gray stone was burning hot. It lay still for a long moment, then the stone paws groped stiffly and it struggled over on its belly, gathered its legs under it, and crawled feebly toward the black line of shadow along the wall.

Shagsu laughed shrilly. If life was what it needed, he would give it life—and make it pay! His thin bronze blade licked out and blood spurted from the donkey's slit throat to make a black pool in which the image of the frog-god squatted. It drew its legs under it and sat soaking in the blood. Its gray-green surface grew sleek and black, its flat body swelled. Its protruding eyes swiveled to study him. Satisfied, it hopped quickly into the shadow, and he snatched it up and held it, kicking and squirming in his hard young fist.

The thing had the greasy feeling of the inert stone from which it had been carved. It looked no more like a real frog now than it had as a stone idol, but it was alive. It would serve him —*him*, Shagsu. They would give him other names than that before he was done!

He turned the situation over in his mind. How did one go about blackmailing a god? Then the stone thing kicked again and his eyes fell on the burnished green basin of the empty pool, blinding bright in the sun. He grinned, and dropped the little idol into the shining bowl.

It slid on its back to the bottom, leaving a trail in the dust that lay thinly over the obsidian. It lay quiet a moment, then righted itself and began to struggle painfully up the polished side, its flat body pressed close against the slick stone, its webbed paws pushing and scuffing. The sun's heat beat down on it, reflected off the polished obsidian until it seemed to Shagsu that the basin was filled with a kind of liquid heat. Up the frog-thing struggled—up and up—and he reached down with the mace and pushed it back, kicking frantically, into the center of the bowl.

Again it tried, and again, and yet again. It never tired. It never succeeded. The obsidian was too smooth, the sides of the bowl too high. It tried to jump, but fell back. At last it settled down to creeping, inch by inch, sometimes almost high enough, sometimes slipping back almost at once, crawling on and on, trying again and again and again with dumb, enduring patience.

Shagsu's bright boy's eyes were pleased. As an urchin in the streets he had tortured frogs, spurred on by the silent patience with which they struggled against the impossible. This was a god! A god—and immortal. Death might free an ordinary frog of the unending torment of the sun, but not this frog of living stone. It would struggle here forever—save when it did his will and he chose to reward it with cool, clear water and oil. He dwelt on the vision of coolness, knowing that the god could read his thoughts. He made them water thoughts: of deep, cool mud and whispering rushes, of fish swimming respectfully albeit stupidly in awed circles about the little Mightiness, of frogs doing obeisance to the Great One of their kind. An hour—a day—ten days: he could wait. It was worth any amount of waiting to be master of a god!

He squatted by the basin's edge, the hem of his robe drawn protectingly over his head, staring into the blank black eyes of the struggling frog-thing. It knew what he wanted. It had saddled

Bowling — or Biking

itself with this idol of gray stone and sat a thousand years or ten thousand until he came and killed its sacred frogs and gave life back to it. It had taken life into its stone body, and now it must keep it forever. That was the way of such things. Only he could release it, in his own good time and at his own high price.

With a sudden impish impulse he stooped and picked it up. It sat a moment, motionless in his palm, fat and ugly, then feebly its legs moved under it and it gave a despairing leap that carried it away from him and down into the dust of the courtyard. Dust covered its sleek sides and became mud in the oil that oozed from its mouth and nostrils. He let it struggle a little against the choking film, then snatched it up and hurled it with all his might against the opposite side of the basin, savagely, filled with an unreasoning anger at its dumb, persistent patience. It slid to the bottom of the half sphere of glassy green, righted itself painfully, and began again the long struggle up and up and up—

A shadow fell across Shagsu's feet. He spun on his bare heels, crouching, his knife in his brown fingers, but the sign that Khem-dag was making with his lean forefinger, writing in strange, archaic characters in the copper beams of sunlight that slanted down over the ruined walls, froze his muscles. He heard the words Khem-dag was muttering and a sudden chill of fear ran down his spine as he saw what the old sorcerer was doing with the flayed body of a still-living frog.

To the child who was born Shem-abba, and who had earned the name Shagsu and others less quotable, the moment that he squatted there in the dust of the temple courtyard lasted a lifetime. Slowly, it seemed, gray shadows came like little swirls in the dust, rising and thickening, until it was as if palm trees and tamarisks grew beyond the weathered walls, and the walls themselves were smoother and white with fresh lime. It was as if the dust had been swept away from the flagstones of the temple court, and gathered into shadows that came crowding through the doorways, pressing close around the gaunt figure of the old wizard. It was as though an invisible barrier held them back, and then the old man's hand fell and his fingers spread in a certain ancient gesture, and the ghosts rushed in.

He saw them clearly in the instant before their shriveled fingers delved into his flesh and closed on his shrinking soul: fire-eyed, ravaged things, all bone and skin and burning, hungry eyes, clothed in the rags of an archaic dress. Then something in his body seemed to kick and writhe under their cruel touch, and a tearing, burning agony ran through every nerve. He fought it a moment as it tore at his very soul, then let go. He glimpsed their skinny arms upflung as they tossed him at the sky. The winds roared around him and the sky spun like a brazen caldron with a spot of burning light that was the sun. He swam, spread-eagled, high above the earth, seeing it under him like a pebble floating in space and filled with the horror of the emptiness in which he lay. Then he was falling back with dreadful speed, down—down—seeing the red desert rush up at him—seeing the roofs of the ruined city and the dry, bare hills beyond—seeing the ravine and the crumbling temple and the empty courtyard, with old Khem-dag standing alone in the sun, his skinny arms outflung, his old eyes staring at the quivering thing that cowered at his feet—seeing the round green eye of the pool growing—brightening—hurtling up at him—

The green, round eye. It was not an eye. It was a basin of green fire, and he lay simmering at its bottom. Fire trickled in little driblets down its polished sides and licked at his tortured flesh. Fire blazed down on him in white, piercing spears flung by the white eye of the sun. Fire filled his body with torment, and he moved stiffly and struggled up the curving sides of the bowl, hugging his body close against the stone to give it purchase, pulling with his spread hands and kicking with his feet. Then one foot slipped—he patted wildly at the empty air and slid, kicking, back to the bottom again. Patiently, with a great weariness, he pulled his legs under him and began to creep doggedly, carefully upward.

The inches passed under his flattened belly, and the quarter inches. Up and up—until the rim of the green bowl was within the focus of his bulging eyes, and the shapes that crouched beyond it, watching him: the tall specter of Khem-dag, watching his struggles benignly from the sanctuary of a long and eventful life—and the naked, skinny brown thing that squatted at the old man's side, following his tortured motions with lively interest. Himself!

The child, Shagsu, beat and kicked with his stone frog's limbs in a tantrum of burst pride and childish resentment at the unjust fate that had trapped him here for all eternity. He beat his immortal body against the green obsidian and blubbered soundlessly with his stone frog's mouth. But Khem-dag merely smiled into his straggling yellow beard and went away, leading the hopping, sprawling thing with a child's body and a frog-god's mind. It had been a close thing—but Shagsu had been a child, who thought as a child, with a child's lack of experience. Magic was a man's work, and with a frog-god at his command he expected to make a very good thing of it in the next century or two.

THE END.

MAGICIAN'S DINNER

By Jane Rice

● The lady couldn't cook—a fact she didn't realize till she tried it. And twenty professional magicians—er, prestidigitators, that is—coming. For once, the magicians got a real magician's dinner, though!

Illustrated by Smith

I have just this minute finished reading an article entitled, "How to Stay Happily Married." The authoress, though I strongly suspect there should be an "a" before those two "s's" instead of an "e," says plain, right out that the reason *she* has stayed happily married for umteen years is a simple one. She has, forsooth, never had any secrets from her husband.

Before I get into this any deeper I would like to bet any and all takers a case of Scotch against a bottle of sarsaparilla that *he* isn't happily married. *She* may trot about humming merrily and being the essence of sweetness and light but I'll wager *he* gets a three-inch layer of goose bumps every time he closes the garage doors and starts his trek to the back porch, thinking as he stumbles along—head sunk on his chest—"Oh, Lordy, *what* is she going to tell me now?"

It sounds all right. Say it over and it sounds hunky-dory. "Never have any secrets from your husband." But, then, to the uninitiated an aroused rattlesnake might sound all right, too. Like rustling autumn leaves, or a scratchy pen signing a blank check.

So *I* say, if you want to stay happily married —or even *married,* for that matter—have at least one good secret from your husband.

It gives a sort of an inside-out bloom that would be worth the amount of the national debt to the cosmetic manufacturers. In fact, I think the cosmetic manufacturers are missing the boat. With every purchase of a what-not-builder-upper they should include a sealed envelope containing one good secret—that's for the dollar size; two middling fair secrets—fifty-cent size.

In my opinion, one good secret is worth ten little, teeny-weeny ones. It is to married life what coca is to cola, what cake is to crumbs, doodle to diddle, ship to ahoy, hit it high in the middle and roll those drums, boy, roll those drums.

Who-o-o-oa-a-a. Wait a minute, until I shift back into neutral. Anyway, I guess you get the idea.

In case you're sitting there reading rapidly from left to right and thinking, "Well, who are you and how do you know so much Nya-a-a-ah!" all I have to say is that Rome wasn't built in a day but it sure as heck was burned in one. Think *that* over, and "nya-a-a-ah," right back at you.

And, besides—all right, so you're not supposed to begin a sentence with "and"—as I was saying, besides, I came very nearly being UNhappily married because I *couldn't* keep a secret and I only managed to rectify my error by going to bed for a week and sharpening my teeth on a thermometer and pretending that I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I really didn't have to pretend very hard. In fact, with the exception of rolling my eyes around a bit and pulling the sheet over my head, I didn't pretend at all and, if I must be truthful, I couldn't help pulling the sheet over my head, either.

However, I arose from my near N. B. a wiser woman. I made up my mind right then and there that never again would I make the mistake of telling Jerry *all.* I remembered—and still remember but too, too clearly—the way he looked at me that ghastly night with a sort of dawning horror in his eyes, as if I were a strip of cheesecloth ectoplasm at a séance or something.

I'm not kidding myself. Jerry could love me till the cows came home at a steady temperature of 202 degrees Fahrenheit—the love, not the cows—but he definitely would not be happily married if, every time he brought guests home for dinner, he had to tell himself beforehand, "Jerry, old boy, there *might* be a ghost in your kitchen beating up a cake or sticking the roast with a long-handled fork. Yes, sir, Jerry old boy, old boy, a ghost. Now, don't be alarmed, Jerry, old boy. It's merely a phenomenon. Clare doesn't object, so why should you? Clare has nerves of steel. Clare is a woman of iron. Clare is a marvelous manager of ghosts. Clare is a horse's neck."

You see?

But, no, of course you don't. You think I'm ranting a trifle, I'm afraid, and, no doubt, you are wondering if that is foam at the corners of my mouth. It isn't. I licked the egg beater a few seconds ago.

Perhaps, I'd better start from the beginning—like a sweater. Knit one, purl one, and it looks a mess, especially where the sleeves go in, but, after it's all done and bound around the edges, you'll see. It might not be very comfortable and it's apt to give you a sort of a kind of a "queechy" feeling but it'll knock old Mrs. How-To-Stay-Happily-Married's eyes out.

And I hope it does. One eye over there under the bookcase and one into the hot-air register.

Little Allie was called Little Allie because her name was Allie and she was little. Simple, wasn't it? She wore black dresses that came down to here and up to here. She wore button shoes, too, and a brooch where her bosom would've been if she'd had any. She had thin, mousy hair which she strained up to the top of her head and anchored in a round, doughnutish effect. She could whip up the best fried apple pies you ever sank a tooth in and it was common gossip in our family that Little Allie always wrapped a napkin around the biscuit plate to keep the biscuits from floating off the table. Her pickled watermelon rind was the talk of my mother's garden club and each slice of one of Little Allie's fruitcakes was both inhaled and exhaled several times over before it was finally consumed with much gustatory smacking.

She was, as I have mentioned, little. She, also, was quiet and she, inexplicably, was desperately fond of me in a stern, disciplinarian sort of manner.

She used to say, "When you gets married, Miss Clare, I'll sure enough cook you a dinner party." And I would yell raucously, "Boys are made of snakes and snails and puppy dogs' tails, that's what *boys* are made of. I'm never going to get married. Never, ever. That's what *I'm* not."

I was a very sweet child, as you can see, addicted to such girlish pastimes as tying bars of soap to my feet and skating blithely on the kitchen linoleum, until I was apprehended, and doing an Annie Oakley in the pantry among the jam jars with a sling shot I had surreptitiously fashioned out of some rubber bands and part of my father's razor strop which I had cut deftly in two for that express purpose.

All in all, however, Little Allie and I got along beautifully. She did raise the roof at my baking a rubber rat in the oven and she was indignant, and rightly so, when she found some fishing

worms I had wheedled away from Tom, the chauffeur, "cooling" in the icebox. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, she was inclined to overlook my shortcomings.

I think the key to her heart was my stomach. That sounds like a blocked metaphor if ever there was one, but it isn't, because Little Allie loved to watch people eat and I was, at that period, as voracious as a horde of locusts.

Down my capacious maw must have gone a ton of Little Allie's cooking and Little Allie was justly proud of the undeniable fact that I bore a striking resemblance to a stuffed pig. She would say to me admiringly, after I had partaken exceptionally well, "My, you looks just like you has got a tumor."

Little Allie died when I was "going on" fourteen.

Time passes, as time has a habit of doing, without my being entirely aware of it. Looking back, it seems impossible that I *wasn't* aware of it for it was comparable to some titanic flood that bore me along on its crest in company with uprooted trees, barns, chicken crates, something called the Charleston, a bunch of little grated grilles off of speakeasy doors, an amazing quantity of juniper berries and glycerin, a succcession of formals *high* in the front and *long* in the back, a thousand horns with derby hats slung over the noise end—though as I recall this had little or no effect on the noise—a lot of glittering lights, much hysterical laughter, and then a loud BOOM that sounded, to my untrained ears, like an ammunition dump going up but which was in reality the stock market going down. When I dug the sludge out of my eyes and looked up there was Jerry.

I would like to be able to put down—at this juncture—that he wore a shining, golden visor and carried a silver mace and that he said something on the order of, "See how she leans her cheek upon her hand! Oh, that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek."

Ah me, sweet dreams.

As a matter of record, he was wearing corduroy pants, an undershirt and a silk hat. Or he *was* wearing a silk hat until he bumped into me and it fell off and I put my foot in it. And he was carrying a thing that looked somewhat like a snood that had had an overdose of Vitamin D. And he said, "Have you seen a rabbit that answers to the name of Benjamin?"

Instinctively, I backed away—the law of self-preservation arising in me like so much Prestone. It wasn't such a neat job of backing and don't laugh. *You* try it with your foot in a silk hat.

"You have your foot in a hat," my future husband commented intelligently.

"It's hoor yat," I said, still backing away.

"What's a hoor yat?" he asked.

"Oors," I said, pointing a trembling finger at him. "It's rours."

"It *looks* exactly like a hat," he said, cocking his head at an angle for a better perspective. "Do they come singly like that or in pairs? And isn't it extremely difficult to walk in them?"

I said, "Glag wumble moop."

He looked at me inquisitively and, then, brightly, *"Parlez vous Français?"*

By this time, I was trying to worm my way into the brick wall of a building and was in imminent danger of coming down permanently with a bad case of dislocated eyeballs.

"Sprechen sie Deutsch?" he said, closing in on me.

I made some vehement and complicated flailing gestures and drooled a large, luscious drool down the front of me.

He eyed me speculatively. "Fevven's sake," he said, finishing sadly, "and pretty, too." Whereupon, he sidled up to me for all the world like a dude rancher preparing to mount a skittish horse. *"Very* pretty," he said and, before I could move, he had pounced and I found myself enveloped down to my waist in the overgrown snood. I opened my mouth and turned out a steady stream of piercing scales all two octaves above high C.

People stopped and began to stare and several crossed the street to our side for a closer view and a small boy tugged at his mother's skirt and said, "Can I have a whistle, too, mamma? Can I, mamma? Can I?" But nobody *did* anything except a swarthy individual in a baggy red sweater who lumbered out of an alleyway and up to us and over whom I immediately swarmed—as best I could, encumbered as I was—in a manner that would have raised the eyebrows of the front row at a girlie show.

"What ails this dame?" the swarthy individual inquired plaintively, meanwhile endeavoring to peel me off like a banana skin.

"Balmy," my persecutor answered succinctly.

The crowd stepped backward with great alacrity.

"Crazy," I yowled, jerking my snood-enwrapped head in several directions at once.

"She's got the twitches bad," the swarthy individual commented.

"Crazy," I bleated. "Crazy."

"You're telling me, sister." He pulled me loose and held me by the snood at arm's length. "Where's her keepers?" he asked my captor.

"I don't know," was the answer. "Here, I'll help you with her. Did you find Benjamin?"

"Naw," the swarthy individual replied and, turning to the crowd, he said, "Any of you folks seen a rabbit named Benjamin?" The crowd shook its head as one man but didn't remove its fascinated gaze from me.

"She's got a hat on her foot," observed a man with a nose like a banana.

"Do they catch them with butterfly nets?" somebody asked.

"Terrible, terrible, just terrible," a fat woman intoned over an armful of packages.

"Look at her eyes," a girl in a sports jacket said to another girl in an identical sports jacket and they held on to each other and shuddered delicately.

"Mamma, can I have a whistle? Can I, mamma?" said the small boy.

"Help," I cried waveringly as the two men picked me up and started down the alley with me. "Help, murder, police!"

"Here, Benjamin," they called in the dulcet tones of twin sirens—both sick. "Here, Benjy, Benjy, *sssp, sssp,* here, Benjy."

I struggled futilely, bit a pie-shaped wedge out of my tongue, got a mouthful of snood in the bargain, looked up to call upon my Maker and beheld a huge bill pasted to the side of the building which said in red letters two feet high:

SUMNER THE MAGICIAN

And above the letters was a picture of the snood man pulling a rabbit out of a silk hat.

By the time the first matinee rolled around, we were engaged.

My family had fits.

His did, too.

Mine said, "But, Clare, darling, a magician!"

His said—and more to the point—"But, Jerry, dear, a socialite!"

I think my parents expected Jerry to swoop in on a broomstick and draw forth a brace of bats from under a flowing, black cape.

I think his parents expected me to whoop in wearing something slinky and sarongish in a satiny sort of way and brandishing a slipper of champagne in each hand.

They reconciled easily.

We had a lovely wedding.

Somehow, I couldn't see myself in my mother's bridal gown—vintage of 1910—holding in my stomach so the seams wouldn't pop and Jerry, for once, got stage fright. "What if I dropped the ring and it rolled under a bridesmaid or a bishop or something?" he said, nervously nibbling his lower lip as if it were a cheese sandwich. So one morning at 9:15 we went to the city hall and at 9:30 we were back out on the sidewalk again.

"I feel just like the angel with pink, spangled wings that used to hang on the top of our Christmas tree," I quoth dreamily. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've just sawed a woman in half," said Jerry, mopping his brow.

Then we broke the news to our respective parents and, as soon as they stopped having some more fits, we went to Chicago, Illinois, where Jerry had an engagement at the State Theater. From there we went to points north, east, south and west, and I learned a lot about hotels I never knew before, and how to take care of small animals, and fold silk handkerchiefs and American flags into boxes with collapsible sides and false bottoms and, as Fibber McGee says, "Stuff like that there." Then *whsssssssst* it was the middle of August and we were in Atlantic City attending a magicians' convention.

Now, what followed was purely Benjamin's fault. Benjamin was one of the silliest rabbits I've ever known, anyway. But a magician's convention is *no* place to have a family, particularly when you're named Benjamin! But Benjamin did and, should you be interested, Benjamin's name is now plain Min. Benjamin had his/her family in the lobby of the Ferry-Fontaine and the manager of the Ferry-Fontaine behaved just like a rocketship on its initial flight to the moon.

So it was Benjamin's fault that I started out to register Sumner and family at a different hotel and ended by renting a furnished house in Margate.

It was a nice house frosted with stucco and hung with candy-striped awnings, and it had a view of the ocean if you got out on the flat roof and stood on tiptoe and looked *hard.* The agent bounded about zipping open closets and beating the inner-spring mattresses with his doubled fists and bouncing on the furniture to show me how comfortable it was, all the while beaming at me, I rather imagine, like the wolf beamed at Little Red Riding Hood.

"How about rabbits?" I hazarded timorously.

"Rabbits!" he exclaimed much as if I had said, "Dinosaurs." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, NO. There are no rabbits anywhere *near* these premises. Absolutely not! You needn't be afraid of rabbits." He neglected, as I later discovered, to mention not being afraid of the silverfish in the bathtub or the mosquitoes that came equipped with their own steam drills.

"Oh, I'm not *afraid* of rabbits," I began, determined to be honest to the bitter end.

"Ho, ho, ho," he laughed, "of course not. Afraid of rabbits, *ho, ho, ho.* What I meant was you needn't *worry* about them."

"Ho, ho, ho," I said, "remind me to introduce you to the manager of the Ferry-Fontaine."

"Is he afraid of rabbits?" asked the agent incredulously.

"No," I said, "but he *worries.*"

"Rabbits in the Ferry-Fontaine!" said the agent.

"Ha!" I said, raising my eyebrows. "Dun't esk."

"Good heavens," said the agent, opening a coat

closet with a mechanical flourish.

"I think," I said, "that closet is just about the right size. With a woolly scarf and Jerry's old Mackinaw, it ought to do, until they're weaned, anyway."

But he didn't hear me. In fact he was still muttering, "Rabbits in the Ferry-Fontaine!" as he folded up his signed document of whereases and whereuntos and left me twiddling with the knobs on the gas stove.

And to prove how fast news really *does* travel —the night we had our dinner party Mrs. Beaurue told me confidently that *she* was leaving the Ferry-Fontaine *toute de suite* because *she* had heard it was infested, literally infested, my dear, with wombats or something; and Mrs. Carlisle overheard her and said, "Not only that, Bessie, but *I* understand the manager has worried so, he is *desperately* ill," and Mrs. Weiboldt spoke up with, "Not *ill,* Margaret. Mad! Stark, *staring* mad!"

Yipee!

Where was I? Oh, yes, dinner party. I don't know why people spend days poring over lists and crossing out names and things. I simply invited the magicians' convention and they came and that was all there was to it.

In a pig's eye.

"To begin with," Jerry said as he SQUASHed a silverfish in the bathtub, "I think it's a marvelous idea, Clare, but oughtn't you to have someone to help? A caterer or some such?"

"Oh, no," I said airily, trying to make the washbowl stopper *stay* down. "I've often heard Little Allie say it wasn't any harder to cook for forty than it was for four. Took longer but it wasn't any harder."

"But, darling, do you know how to cook?"

"It's quite simple," I declared, watching the stopper inch slowly upward. "It's written down in books. All you have to do is do what it says to do. Half a cup of this, teaspoonful of that."

"Is it that easy?"

"Of course," I said, condescendingly, "you merely have to know how to read."

"Have you got a book?"

"Yes. I bought one today and some knives and junk."

"Don't you think it might be advisable if we stayed home tonight and you sort of . . . uh . . . practiced. After all, they just got everything connected up today—the gas and stuff. What I mean is—these people are invited for tomorrow." The way he said "tomorrow" sounded like *they* were Danny Deever and *we* were Files on Parade.

"Look," I said, "if Little Allie could cook *I* can cook. She didn't even go to kindergarten and I graduated from finishing school. I can read twice as fast and, in case you've forgotten, tonight is the night *you* are master of ceremonies at the Bay Shore Club and *I* am wearing that chiffon number with no back and you needn't say it's cool and don't I need a wrap because it isn't cool and backs are the thing this season and you might as well stop trying to cover mine up and will you *please* do something about this stopper?"

That, my friends, was that. Let us skip the intervening hours and raise the curtain on me bidding Jerry a wifely good-by as he sallies forth at an ungodly hour the next morning to go deep-sea fishing with some more magicians. He sallies forth vowing to return in time to mix cocktails and I bid him a wifely good-by vowing never again to eat the cherries out of Manhattans. It isn't the Manhattans that make you feel like that, it's the cherries. Or—up until the fourth Manhattan, it isn't the Manhattans.

I dragged myself together after a while, looked enviously in on Benjamin's family, all of whom seemed to be doing very nicely, although they kept melding before my eyes, and I made a list of groceries.

I'll spare you the list. It ran well into six pages of Ferry-Fontaine stationery. This was the menu:

Baked ham, horseradish sauce, lobster aspic with Blackstone dressing, macaroni with tomatoes and mushrooms, tomato and cheese ring, cheese carrots, crescent rolls, chocolate-coffee ice cream, almond cookies, stuffed dates, coffee, after-dinner mints, plus the charged water and what have you for the cocktails and the cans of caviar and anchovies for the hors d'œuvres.

I figured one dinner like that would serve ten, so I multiplied by four and ordered that much. The grocery called back in fifteen minutes to verify the order. They thought they were being kidded.

I whiled away the interim by "straightening up" the house and playing Run Sheep Run with the silverfish and taking three aspirins.

The groceries arrived at 12:45 and at 1:50 I had finished unpacking, unwrapping and untying and had begun to develop splayed feet and a hunchback. At 1:51 I discovered that it was utterly impossible to get four hams in the oven at once and, even if I could, I only had one roaster, anyway. At 1:52 I discovered the cookbook advocated simmering them first and, by the same token, I had nothing to simmer them in. At 1:53 I discovered that even if I had things to simmer them in first and bake them in second they still wouldn't be done in time for dinner. At 1:54 I discovered *that* didn't matter, either, because I didn't know how to light the oven. At 1:55 I looked about me and lifted up my voice in an eerie wail such as might have emanated from Pompeii on the zero hour of its fatal last day.

We'll now lower that curtain I raised a while ago and you can consider yourselves lucky. If you would *like* to know what happened behind it, go read "Ivanhoe"—the part where Ulrica the Hag dashes wildly hither and yon, her hair streaming, her mouth agape, as she prepares to hurl herself down from the battlements.

I was on the verge of a hurl—high, wide and handsome—and, if the ham hadn't been so heavy, I might've gotten it through the window at that, if somebody behind me hadn't said, *"Tch, tch,* you just quit behaving like that or I'll tan your T-heinie. Look at this kitchen. Just look at it. Miss Clare, ain't you ashamed? Ain't you a*shamed?"*

I did a pivot turn that would have been worth a goal in a fast game of hockey and the ham slipped out of my hands and fell with a thud on top of another ham and, from a great distance, I heard my voice—or what was left of it—yelp, "Little Allie!" And the yelp went up and down like a business chart for the 1930s.

I would like to state, right here and now, that those who say, "My blood froze," don't know what they're talking about. It doesn't freeze. It curdles and separates in chunks like clabber.

"Little Allie," I whispered and the whisper ran all the way around the room and back into my mouth.

"You is the biggest mess maker," said Little Allie, arms akimbo, surveying the litter. "You sure is the biggest mess maker *I* ever seen."

"You're dead," I yipped in a shrill falsetto, "you died . . . you did . . . you died—" and the falsetto broke in two distinct pieces and my knees gave way and I slid gently down by degrees until I came to rest on top of a ham and, as if it had released a hidden spring in me, I began to weep blindly, uncontrollably and inexhaustibly. A sort of blond Boulder Dam effect smelling highly of pork.

Up until I married Jerry I had always thought of "spooks" as being transparent, floaty things possibly "bright" in a nebulous, hard-to-put-the-finger-on fashion and, usually, stalking in and out of the woodwork on the stroke of midnight or thereabouts. Jerry put the skids under this theory practically at once. There was nothing to it, he said. There was not a single, solitary, recorded instance where an alleged apparition could not be duplicated by mechanical means. In fact, Jerry rated quite high in the ranks of "spook exploders." "Spooks," said Jerry, *"pfui!"*

There was no *pfui* about Little Allie. She didn't float and she wasn't transparent. There was no discernible "brightness" but there, also, was no *pfui.*

I found this out, to my utmost astonishment, when she pattered across to the sink, drew a glass of water and proceeded to throw it in my

face with the stern admonition that brooked no quibbling: "You just stop that foolishness. Who you think you are tallyhooting like that? *Ain't* you ashamed?"

I sat there with my bangs dripping and my jaw like a garden gate on Hallowe'en and I sniffed wetly and quavered through the final tear, "B-but you're . . . you're a s-sp-spoo . . . ghost."

"That's neither here nor there," said Little Allie, which was stating the circumstances bluntly if you ask me.

"A g-gh-gho . . . spook," I said, wiping my nose on my sleeve.

"Go wash your face," Little Allie said. "If you ain't a sight I never seen one. Go on, now, Miss Clare, don't rise no provocations in me."

"You can't . . . you aren't . . . how did . . . you couldn't . . . Jerry says—" I babbled, not stirring from my ham.

Little Allie put her hands on her hips and surveyed me with exasperation. "*I* know what your Mr. Jerry says," she said with a toss of her head. "You don't have to tell *me* what *he* says. Him and his notionary contraptions. *I* says you go wash your face and get yourself ordered around and then you come straight back down here and set that table. I got enough to do, smoothing up your mess making without tending to that. Now skidoo."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear no more out of you. You do what you're told."

"Little Allie, you're not going to cook dinner?"

"I'd like to know who is if I ain't," she snapped. "And I ain't going to stand here arguing with you. Time's a-wasting. No go on with you."

"But, Little Allie—"

"Get!"

It took me twenty minutes and three attempts at a mouth before I eventually lipsticked one on that didn't look like a finger-printing exercise for four-year-olds. It took another twenty minutes to get into one of those button-up-the-back frocks and fifteen more before I learned the reason for my walking like Charlie Chaplin was that I had my shoes on the wrong feet. They were the right feet but they were on wrong—Oh, well, skip it. All told, from shower to the finished product rolling off the assembly line, I was a good hour.

By then I had recovered my aplomb, somewhat, and had about convinced myself that I was a victim of a left-over Manhattan mirage and that we simply would have to eat out, all forty-two of us, and the hell with it—when I heard a sound that sent a dozen assorted chills coursing up my spine.

Slap, slap, slap, slap, plop. Slap, slap, slap, slap, plop.

I knew what it was. My entire childhood flashed before my eyes in one comet-tailed sweep. It was, unmistakably, Little Allie making butterballs.

It was true!

I counted up to ten. I said, "Steady, old girl." I practiced swallowing. I said, "Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow." I said, "I am Clare Sumner. I have blond hair and blue eyes and a chicken-pox scar on my left shoulder blade." And, from out of nowhere, I remembered a ghost story I had read wherein the haunter was dispersed by the artful expedient of the hauntee looking it kadink in the eyes and being firm about the whole thing.

I went downstairs. I strode into the kitchen. I looked Little Allie kadink in the eyes. She looked back.

"You sure is powerful puny-looking," was her dour comment as she plopped a butterball into a green bowl, "powerful puny. You looks like there ain't hardly enough meat on you to feed a fair-sized crow." She shook her head disapprovingly. "Right porely," she said and, with a return of her old fire, "Now set that table, young lady, and no never-minds."

The hauntee I had read about, I reflected as I laid out forks, was a faker—or else his particular haunter was not up to the caliber of Little Allie.

The afternoon wore on and me with it. I couldn't stay in the kitchen and I couldn't stay out of it. Little Allie let me work it out for myself. She gave me a spoon and a bowl with some batter in it and told me to beat. She gave me a pan and a spatula and a three-tiered cake and told me to spread icing. She gave me a tin and a knife and told me to cut the fluffy mixture therein into squares. I knew she did these things to give me a chance to shape myself into a normal frame of mind and she knew I knew and I knew she knew I knew, and I tried awfully hard not to shiver and quake in a noticeable manner for her sake.

After all it must be terribly humiliating to have people knocking their knees and chattering their teeth at you just because you aren't any more. Especially when you're as nice as Little Allie was when she used to be. I mean it wasn't her fault that she was a "has-been" in the literal sense of the words.

I think she felt it keenly for she was very noncommittal about it.

Ultimately, I could contain myself no longer and asked her point-blank, "How . . . how did you *get* here?"

To which she replied with a shrug, "I just come."

"But *how*, Little Allie?"

"Well," she said, dusting paprika on a mound of something, "I was *there* and I went *through* and got *here*."

"Where is there?"

"Why, it's just there."

"Is it up?"

"I couldn't rightly say, Miss Clare."

"It isn't . . . isn't down, is it?" I ventured hesitantly.

"I couldn't rightly say."

"But where *is* there, then?"

Little Allie returned the paprika to the shelf and puckered her lips in a puzzled grimace I recollected well. She made a sort of an out-folding motion with her hands. "Why, it's *there*," she said and unconsciously I found myself leaning forward, peering nearsightedly into space as if to penetrate a gauzy veil that hung between me and an ill-lighted stage. Little Allie completed the gesture, took down a box of raisins and dribbled some into a buttered Pyrex dish. "Just like here is here," she said complacently.

For some unexplainable reason I felt incredibly stupid, as if I had totally missed the point in a carefully diagramed geometry problem.

"How did you get through?" I pressed.

"By coming through."

"Through what?"

"Through there."

"You mean there is a *place* between 'here' and 'there'?"

"A place? No there ain't no place."

"A mist, perhaps? A twilight?"

"There ain't nothing. You is there. And you comes *through* it and, after you has come a ways you is here."

"What is 'a ways'? How far is it?"

"Not far."

"But *how* far, Little Allie?"

"I couldn't rightly say, Miss Clare, but I would judge it wasn't no farther from there to here than it is from here to there."

I tried a flank approach. "What is in 'there'?"

Little Allie gave me an aggravated look.

"Lay-overs to catch meddlers," she said tartly. "Now leave me be. Your front doorbell's ringing, anyways, and if I was you I would let *them* do the talking. You is apt to put your foot in your mouth, you is." She waved a spoon threateningly under my nose. "Mind your P's and Q's," she said and added darkly, "or I'll see to it that them magicians gets magicked sure enough."

"Little Allie, you wouldn't *do* anything," I expostulated, conjuring in my fevered brain a vision of Little Allie doing a suspended levitation over the dinner table.

"You mind your P's and Q's," she repeated emphatically.

"Flowers," I said blankly. "Flowers! I forgot to order flowers. I haven't got any flowers for the table!"

"I'll see to the flowers; you go answer that doorbell before it gets itself stuck."

I threw my arms around Little Allie and gave her a bear hug. "I don't know what I would've done without you. Truly I don't."

"I don't neither," said Little Allie with pardonable pride.

It didn't dawn on me until I had opened the front door that the hug I had bestowed on Little Allie was much the same as if I had grabbed a fog bank.

"My dear," said Mrs. Weiboldt, forging in, "don't look so surprised. I'm *always* early. Oh, here comes Bessie. Yoo hoo, Bessie, right here. If you park behind *me*, leave plenty of room to get out. Clare, what a darling house! Are you and Jerry staying through the duration of the season? Maybe I'd better put my things in your bedroom, dear; there seems to be rabbits in the coat closet. What a gorgeous aroma! Don't tell me it's cinnamon buns. I do adore cinnamon buns though Malcolm says— Oh, there's Margaret and Sue is with her—Mrs. Holmes, you know. The *second* Mrs. Holmes— They say the *first* Mrs. Holmes—"

With Mrs. Weiboldt around I decided I wouldn't have any too much difficulty minding my P's and Q's. If I opened my mouth I could rest assured the foot that went in it would be hers —not mine.

The wives continued to arrive and soon the house rang with that peculiar sonance that arises whenever two or more women are gathered together. Like a Chinese talkie run backward, or a group of delirious linguists speaking phonetics from which all the vowels have been painstakingly deleted, or a flock of extremely nervous poultry.

I'm not poking fun at my sex and don't think it for a minute. We can't help our group noises any more than men can help theirs and *they* have a brilliance of tone that is unequaled, except by a bunch of hungry grizzly bears mulling over the badly battered carcass of a mountain goat.

Driblets of husbands began to put in their appearance and, just as I had decided Jerry had been lost at sea, he caromed in, lugging a finny thing with an adenoidy expression in a vicious sort of way.

I was so intent on getting this denizen of the deep out of smelling distance—via the rear entrance—that I didn't think about my other denizen and merely said as I propelled Jerry along toward the back door, "She's helping me."

"'Sfine," said Jerry, throwing Little Allie a

hasty glance and—hugging his fish—protestingly, "But, Clare—"

"But me no buts. Out with it."

"But *sweet*heart—"

"Sweet me no sweethearts, either. Rabbits, pigeons, white mice, guinea pigs, fresh eggs, yes. Fish, no."

"Clare, I will *not*—"

"Cocktails, Jerry, remember? For *forty* people," I interposed sweetly.

"Oh, gosh! Oh, my gosh!"

"Mr. Jerry," said Little Allie, "I done got some punch here. If you'd taste it before you gets into your dressed-up clothes, I could take it in. If it suited you."

"Punch?" said Jerry. "You mean—"

"Yes, sir," said Little Allie, bobbing and smiling, "if it suits you."

"Why, say," said Jerry, beaming at Little Allie, "you're a helper after my own heart."

"I aims to please," replied Little Allie, returning him beam for beam. "Here it is, right here."

"Why, say," repeated Jerry and, visibly flattered, he crossed the kitchen to Little Allie and bent over while she ladled some punch into his mouth and wiped off the drip.

"Perfect," he said, his face lighted up like the Palmolive Beacon. "Absolutely perfect."

Little Allie dropped him a half curtsy. "I'm glad it suits you. I'll take it in while you gets fixed up handsome."

"Sure," Jerry said. "Swell."

"You just put that fish— Land sakes, he sure is a whooper, ain't he? My first husband, Mose, was a one to take on about fish he was—drowned, he did. Well, you just put the fish out on the porch in a basket I got fixed there and run along, now. I always says it ain't much of a party till the host gets things rolling."

"That's right," Jerry agreed, expanding his chest two full inches.

"Yes, *sir*." Little Allie opened the door for him and watched him tenderly lay his catch in the basket.

"What're all these hams and things?" Jerry asked curiously, regarding the stacks of edibles that Little Allie had unceremoniously piled on the porch.

"Them? Nice, ain't they? I mean with food prices going up and all, it's a smart man what knows to lay in a supply. Yes, sir, a mighty smart man. Now you just traipse along. Once you is all spruced up I spect this here party is really going to *be* a party. Yes, sir."

"You betcha," said Jerry as he sped by on his way to the shower.

Little Allie closed the door and regarded me with disapproval.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Miss Clare. Men ain't like horses. They is like pack mules. You don't ride 'em. You load 'em up and lead 'em."

"Those groceries," I said. "You didn't cook them. You—"

"Didn't need 'em," she said. "Don't fret yourself. There'll be plenty of victuals to go around. Where you want this punch served? In the living room?"

I leveled an agitated forefinger at the punch bowl. "That," I squawked, "is the punch bowl my mother used to borrow from my aunt Lena when we had the family reunions."

"Yes'm."

"And ten years ago my cousin Robin tipped it over and broke it."

"Yes'm."

"Into a thousand pieces."

"Yes'm."

"What, in the name of Heaven, is it doing HERE?"

"There wasn't nothing else big enough."

"But it was broken and swept up and thrown in the ash can!"

"Yes'm."

"But it couldn't *be* here."

"No'm."

"But it *is*."

"Yes'm."

"How . . . how did you . . . did you get it?"

"I materialized it."

"I don't foll— Wait, you mean you said, 'Abracadabra,' and it . . . it appeared?"

"No'm. I didn't say nothing. I just materialized it."

"Out of thin air!"

"No'm."

"Out of what?"

"Out of what it was."

"What was it?"

"Your aunt Lena's punch bowl."

"But *how*, Little Allie? Where?"

"Where? You mean where was it to materialize?"

"Yes."

"I'm not much account at explaining things, Miss Clare."

"Try."

"It's like this, Miss Clare." Little Allie drew her brows together in profound concentration. "If something was, it can't ever not have been, could it?"

"No."

"And if it can't ever *not* have been then it has got to have been a something that was a is once, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"And once it has been a is it can't ever not have been a not be, can it?"

"No."

"Well, that's all."

"But it was *broken.*"

"Yes'm."

"But once it was broken, don't you see, it became a was."

"Yes'm."

"Then *how*—"

"Miss Clare," Little Allie interrupted, sighing at my lack of intelligence, "to be a was it has to be a is first—there's no getting around it—and if it was a is no matter if it is a was it is a is where it was and it always will be a is even when it is a was as long as this here punch bowl of your aunt Lena's has been a is that was." She halted triumphantly. "I reckon *that's* clear, ain't it?"

"Certainly," I said weakly, "it's as clear as the inside of a bag of soot," and I tottered out to my assembled guests, Little Allie bringing up the rear with my aunt Lena's punch bowl that is a was no matter what *any*body says.

I wouldn't have touched it or one of those fragile gilt-handled cups for all the rice in China. Nor drunk the punch for, to me, it looked exactly like the punch that my cousin Robin had quaffed with such gusto these many, many moons past.

Apparently they seemed to enjoy it as much as the Robin of yore had enjoyed it. Maybe age improved it, I don't know, but the fact remains they were all in a convivial mood and, when dinner was announced, readily accepted my laughing statement—*hahahaha*—that "a floral centerpiece takes up too much room." I could've left it. I don't suppose they'd have noticed it was composed entirely of calla lilies and tuberoses but, although it wasn't arranged to spell out *Requiescat In Pace,* it did have a large lavender bow tied around the container and the result was much the same.

I took it out in the kitchen and put it on the drainboard.

"Is this one of those is wases?" I asked Little Allie.

"Yes'm," she answered, obviously delighted with my acumen.

The dinner—buffet supper, really, since everyone stood or sat where and on what they chose—went off without a hitch. True, it almost struck a temporary snag when Edna Patricks gave a squeal and gasped, "She came right through the wall!"

We all looked at Little Allie who put a dish of relish on the sideboard and said to nobody in particular, "Sure must of been mighty fine punch."

Everybody chuckled, including Edna, who said ruefully, "It *looked* like she came through the wall. *Wow*—am I punchy!"

Everybody laughed again and the incident was passed off with no more thought.

One other episode occurred when Little Allie, distressed at the sight of such a throng standing and eating off the mantel and the radio, et cetera, attempted to bring in more chairs. I nipped this promptly in the bud. Not that we didn't need the chairs, but the ones she had were not only stiff and unyielding but had been the property of my great-uncle Nathaniel and had burned to cinders in a fire on Spring Garden Street in Philadelphia in 1921.

Otherwise the dinner was a gastronomical success. It should've been. It was the dinner Little Allie had cooked many times before and had been referred to in our family as "Little Allie's Reunion Dinner." Little Allie—needless to say—was elated with so many people eating so much. It warmed the cockles of her heart—even as it chilled mine—for, you see, I knew they weren't actually eating anything. They merely *thought* they were. The food they popped in their mouths had been eaten years ago. Instead of turkey and cranberry sauce, they were partaking heartily of is wases.

I kept telling myself, "You mustn't laugh, Clare, it's horrible," and in the next breath, "Don't cry, you idiot, it's funny," and when Bob Holmes took a wishbone I almost blurted, "Oh, no! The children *always* get those." And when Mrs. Weiboldt inquired where on earth I had gotten such *beautiful* oysters, I came very near replying, "Grandfather has them shipped in ice *all the way* from Atlantic City."

There was one dish that was a stranger to the Reunion Dinner. It was a yellowish-brown goo of sorts that Jerry fell upon with yelps of unalloyed joy.

"Sorghum butter!" he cried, his eyes sparkling. "My gosh, I haven't had any sorghum butter for a coon's age. Not since Della died. Boy, could she make good sorghum butter! But this is just as good," he avowed, hastily catching my frigidly set expression. "Can't tell the difference," he asserted warmly. "Just like Della's. Um-m-m, boy! Hey, Bob, come here and have some of this sorghum butter."

"What in hell is sorghum butter?" Bob Holmes asked, taking a tentative taste and then helping himself liberally.

"I dunno. It's just sorghum butter. Isn't it the nuts?"

"What is sorghum?"

"Cane molasses. Thick. You've got some on your chin. Snitsy, eh?"

"Not bad. How'd you find out about it?"

"Della used to make it."

"Della?" Bob winked at me. "Who's she? First row, chorus?"

"Della! Why—oh, you're pulling my leg. She

was our cook. Died in 1916. Flu. She was the best sorghum butter maker this side of the Alleghenies."

"So you passed the secret on to Clare."

"Yep, I passed the se— Why, no, I didn't. Clare, how did you know about sorghum butter? What's wrong, dear, don't you feel well?"

"The . . . the . . . I'd better see about the boobledumps," I said and fled kitchenward, bumping into Mrs. Weiboldt who trilled, "Darling, what divine food! Where did you *unearth* such a heavenly cook?"

The "divine" and the "heavenly" were bad enough but with the "unearth" sandwiched in between I came as close as that to folding up like a card table. I didn't, though.

I said, "She's a visitant. Webster defines it as one who or that which."

"Really," beeped Mrs. Weiboldt. "Dollie, did you hear what Clare just said? Her cook is from Webster, Virginia. I must admit there is some ethereal touch that Southern cooks have that—" But, by then, I was through the swinging door.

Little Allie faced me unflinchingly. "*He* likes it, don't he?" she said.

"*He* wants to know how *I* know about it!"

"Miss Clare, ain't no use in getting riled. You just remember when you gets settled to get some sorghum—farmers has the best—and you just put it in a mixing bowl and you get you a wooden slitted masher and—"

"And let Della do the rest. It's too bad you didn't ask Mrs. Weiboldt's old, dead cook what *she* liked, and Mrs. Holmes' what *she* liked and Mr. Holmes," I said hoarsely, "and the Beaurues and Medfords and Clarks and . . . and—"

"Miz Weiboldt likes kippered herring," Little Allie put in with a wry grimace, "and Miz Holmes likes pickled pig's feet and Mr. Holmes he likes hog jowl and turnip greens. I couldn't rightly say about the Beaurues and Clarks—I ain't come in contact with any of their help—but the Medfords likes tripe!" She shook her head decisively. "'Twouldn't have done."

"You don't mean . . . they told you . . . before you . . . you didn't ask—"

"No'm, I didn't ask. They volunteered. Hattie, that's Miz Halloway's Hattie, passed through in 1920, measle complications, she offered to give me a crab-meat casserole. 'Casserole,' I says. 'Hmph,' we is having turkey. And about that sorghum butter, Miss Clare, you don't have to tell everything you knows, or know everything you tells. Just smile. It works out to a better advantage anyways. Now skedaddle. I got to see about this here coffee."

"Are they . . . in . . . there?"

"Who?"

"That Della Jerry spoke about and Mrs. Halloway's Hattie and . . . and people like Mr. Kronx, the postman, and Marvin, the grocer's boy, and Mrs. Wagsworth who lived across the street and had thirty cats and sewed her money in the hems of her dresses and Linda Darell who 'came out' the season I did and had a yellow Kissel roadster and—" but my breath gave out.

"Where else you 'spect them to be? Get out of my way, Miss Clare, before you gets scalded."

"Little Allie," I shrilled, "don't you dare let them through. Do you hear me? Don't you *dare.*"

Little Allie drew herself up and gave me a withering glance. "You needn't worry none," she said scornfully, "they knows their place. They ain't busting in lessn they's invited."

"You did," I said bluntly, impolitely, and a shade hysterically.

Little Allie added an extra notch to her height. "And I'd like to know where you'd of been if I *hadn't,*" she replied sharply.

She had me there.

"Trying to put four hams in one oven," she continued, "and buying mushrooms at this time of year and not having no more sense than to . . . well, don't commence blubbering about it . . . swells up your eyes . . . didn't mean it noway. There now, baby, don't carry on. There . . . there . . . that's it, blow your nose. Hard. There . . . there . . . you knows I was just talking. Little Allie didn't mean to get you all stirred around. You knows that, honey, don't you?"

"S-sure," I said.

"Well, quit pestering me and get yourself in to your guests. Ain't you got no company manners?"

I had the last word, though. I said, "Don't take that coffee through the wall. It might splash on the paper."

Little Allie was abashed. "I just didn't recollect where I was at," she said with embarrassment.

Tempus fugit. On wings of lead. I smiled and I said, "Oh, yes?" and "Oh, no?" and I mingled like a proper hostess, and I passed salted nuts and cigarettes, and mints, and went about chirping, "More coffee?" at people and I was doing all right until somebody—Marjorie Bell, I think, I hope she roasts in— Well, anyway, I was doing all right until she suggested a séance.

Giggling and fluttering her eyelashes, she suggested a séance. For the fun of it, you know. Jokingly, she suggested it. I'll never understand why I didn't brain her where she stood. I think I was too numb. By the time I had recovered my wits the vaccination had taken and, being a magically inclined crowd, everyone was charmed with Marjorie's brain child.

Everyone but me. I kept hearing Little Allie's words, "—they ain't busting in *lessn they's invited—*"

"Let's play Tripoli," I said.

Nobody heard me, intent as they were on Jerry who was offering fifty dollars and half of Benjamin's family to anyone who could show evidence of any sort that could not be reproduced by mechanical means. Hear. Hear.

"Tripoli," I said pleadingly.

"Into the living room, everybody," said Jerry.

The crush was very similar to that of a subway during the rush hour, but we managed somehow, though there were pleasant murmurs of, "My elbow, dear," or, "Do you mind, Kate? My foot seems to be under yours," and, "Oh, pardon, was I scratching *your* ankle." Quite sociable.

I was still crying feebly, "Tripoli, Tripoli, Tripoli," like a Black Shirt staging a demonstration, as Jerry doused the lights. The last thing I saw before darkness engulfed our gathering was Little Allie standing in the doorway with her shadow looming black and big behind her and I could've sworn I heard whisperings in the kitchen, though it might have been Jerry hissing for silence.

In a gang of forty, well wined and dined, silence was hard to get. Jerry turned on the lights and said dolefully, "Look here, you've *got* to keep quiet."

May Blakesmith screeched and then blushed a yummy eighteen-carat blush. "Sorry," she apologized, "I got sort of frightened. The lights. Tricky. The shadows rushing back into the wall. Go ahead."

Jerry doused the lights again.

"I see what you mean," Ella Medford—she of the tripe—spoke up. "They rush out, too, don't they?"

"Sigh-lunce!" This from Jerry.

He got it gradually—a little, rustling, pause-filled silence that seemed to filter through the darkness as if someone were sifting it down on us like flour. Finally, it was complete.

I can't describe it. It was like the hush before a dawn. Or the queer, deep, pervading quietness that makes oneself seem the very heart and core of one of those slow, heavy snowstorms that

leave the shrubs puffy and white and the tree boughs bent with their cottony burdens and the whole world breathless with spent strength. It was a silence that could be tasted, thick on the tongue as clotted cream. A silence, one felt, that could be fingered like the rich pile of velvet or closed to like Stygian portieres weighted with dust and forgotten yesterdays and the musty smell of dead wood fires. A smothering, stilled silence. The silence of shrouds and tombs and the silence of earth. The earth of grass roots and blind worms. It grew and it grew and it grew like some gigantic black tulip or a pressure gauge going up and up and up, and I thought wildly, "This is how it feels in a dive bomber."

I can't explain what followed any more than I could explain the hazy perception of the just-beforeness of going to sleep, if you know what I'm— But you do, of course. We all know that drowsy, anæsthetic sensation. We can't explain it, but we know it. So it was with this.

One moment I was aware of that awful, stifling silence—the consuming darkness—the presence of others around me—and the next moment I was alone. It was such an aloneness as I have never known. A vast plane of loneliness stretching beyond and behind and above and below. It was like an immeasurable plateau of isolation. A wilderness of solitude done in charcoal.

I don't know why I was so terrified. But I was. My ears pinned themselves close against my skull, my lips drew back over my teeth, and I found myself listening, every muscle taut, listening, listening, and as I listened I became aware of a chasm. It lay in the darkness before me. It *was* the darkness before me and, had I tossed a stone into its illimitability—I know not whether it went up or down, it was a chasm, and it was "there"—but had I tossed a stone I could not have fathomed the immensity of the breach more fully.

Then I heard it, the sound of rushing feet, like the swift patter of spring rain. And the sound was below and beyond and above and embedded deeply in the shadows behind me that massed themselves into great, craggy thunderheads shot through with susurrations. I realized—without *really* realizing, that somewhere near there were people, hordes of people crowding and pushing and shoving, trying to get through, and that they had always been there, pulling and scrabbing at the darkness and whispering, whispering, "This way, this way, this way, help me, help me, help me, I'll never lose *my* money, it's sewed in the hems of my dresses, here, Pussy, here, Pussy, Pussy, Pussy, Pussy . . . I'm going to get a Kissel, I made father promise, they can do sixty-five . . . two letters for you, Miss Clare . . . my name's Marvin, I'm the grocer's boy, there's typhoid over our way across the tracks—" and through it all a steady, familiar beat that I tried with fear-driven desperation to place. My mind seemed filled with cobwebs and wheeling bats and ever that sound of shuffling, scrambling feet, hurrying, hurrying, hurrying and everything over-ridden by this constant, undeviating *thunk, thunk, thunk*—like a trip hammer, or the pound of a blacksmith's maul, or my grandfather's cane stumping along a gloomy passageway.

My grandfather's cane! It *was*. It WAS!

I tried to run but I was tripped and my skirt was clutched by myriads of unseen, cadaverous fingers and I brushed against formless, phantom shapes that melted and closed in behind and around me. I tried to scream. I couldn't. It was held fast in some lost locked box hidden deep

in the darkness, that dreadful, suffocating darkness honeycombed with whisperings.

"Two times two is four . . . thank you for the apple, Clare . . . here, Pussy, Pussy . . . just because I hauls trash don't mean I ain't fifteen . . . my name's Marvin, that'll be eight sixty-five . . . this way, this way, this way, help me . . . paper, wuxtra paper, get your paper here . . . violets, miss, twenty-five a bunch . . . help me . . . tickets, please, have your tickets ready . . . this way, this way . . . here, Pussy, here, Pussy, Pussy, Pussy . . . *thunk, thunk, thunk* . . . don't make a fool of yourself, my child . . ."

I thrust out at the blackness with my hands, trying to shove it away and my hands encountered other hands, innumerable, grasping hands, bony and cold and brittle and dank with the wet slipperiness of underground things. Hands that clawed and tore and pulled, and, suddenly, other hands—firm, competent hands, caught mine, disentangled them from the folds of darkness and swept to the curtains.

—don't make a fool of yourself, my child—

"Grandfather," I shrieked. "Grandfather!" And I fell forward into a pit of night as with a gush the mountainous shadows encompassed me.

From afar I heard screaming—a high, weird oooooooing like a beagle on the scent—and, then, oblivion.

Oblivion didn't last very long. I struggled up

through it, remembered, and did my best to draw it around me again to no avail. Jerry wouldn't have it. In novels the hero presses the heroine close in his arms and smooths back her hair while he murmurs sweet nothings in her shell-like ear. Jerry took my feet and propped them at a forty-degree angle against the wall and forthwith, without so much as a by-your-leave, began to "unloosen" me, using my shell-like ear as a handle to pump my back buttons undone.

I revived promptly, sat up, said, "Tripoli, where's my grandfather's cane, I *hate* Marjorie Bell, Robin broke the punch bowl, here, Pussy, Pussy, Pussy," hiccuped and fainted dead away again.

In the succeeding days as I lay safe in bed with a hot-water bottle at my feet and an ice-bag on my head I had plenty of leisure to be thankful for my narrow escape.

Not from that . . . that . . . those whatever they were, but from telling ALL to Jerry as I so nearly did after the guests had gone and the house was quiet and Jerry sat on the edge of my inner-spring mattress and talked to me.

"What made you act like that?" he asked, like Pasteur questioning a hydrophobic Russian.

"Like what?" I countered weakly.

"Running amok like you did. Grabbing George Burton's hands and bumping into people and behaving like a . . . like a . . . well, like you did. Clare, did you . . . did you see anything?"

"See anything? No, I didn't *see* anything."

Jerry was palpably relieved. "I'm glad. I thought for a minute . . . it would have been . . . well, all those mediums I've investigated would've been . . . you're sure you didn't see anything?"

"No, I didn't see anything. Did anybody *see* anything?"

"No," Jerry said. "No-o-o-o-o-o."

"Why 'no-o-o-o-o-o,' just like that?"

"I don't know. I . . . I . . . can't explain it. I had such a feeling of—I know you'll think me frightfully silly—but it was a feeling of aloneness as if I were on some tremendous elevation and there . . . were . . . whisperings. Only *now* I realize that it was you." He smiled reproachfully at me. "We had to tackle you. Clare, you look so funny. You *didn't* see anything, did you?"

"That feeling of aloneness," I said, "I had it, too. And there *were* people, Jerry, I could sense them hiding there, *trying*, oh, Jerry, don't *look* at me like that! There *were* people—or things. I *heard* them. I *felt* them. Little *Allie* told me—"

"Little Allie told you? Told you what? Who is this Little Allie?"

"She's the cook that—" But I didn't go on. I couldn't. Jerry's attitude as he perched there—tense and sort of stricken—told me that I couldn't. Jerry, the champion "spook exploder." I couldn't. I simply *couldn't* do that to Jerry. It would be like a Singer's midget knocking out Joe Louis. I simply couldn't.

"Did anybody else feel or hear or sense anything?" I asked.

"No," Jerry said, "at least after they found out it was you they didn't. I think at first they were a bit, shall I say, startled?"

"Yes," I said, grimly, "I can imagine."

"Go on, Clare, about this Little Allie."

"Has the ah . . . er . . . helper I had gone?"

"Yes. I guess the séance got her down. But what about this Little Allie? I've an idea you . . . she . . . is it . . . Clare what about this Little Allie?"

I knew then it was up to me or else. I should have been an actress. I made my eyes wide and glassy and it was no effort, I assure you, and, remembering what Little Allie had said, I just smiled.

I smiled like that for fifteen minutes straight, at the end of which time Jerry left me abruptly and called the doctor.

So it ends.

In all fairness I must confess that it rankles to be referred to as Public Ghost No. 1 by such people as Marjorie Bell. But I'll never tell. Wild horses couldn't drag it from me. And don't you or I'll slit your pretty little gullet from ear to ear. Jerry might hear of it and I'd have to go through that performance again.

Of Little Allie—she won't come back. I'm positive of that. I didn't attempt another dinner party until we were "settled" in Evanston, Illinois, and I had hired a cook. No two women can use the same kitchen. *That* is as authentic as the law of centrifugal force. The cook's name is Ambulance Johnson and we call her Beulah and she doesn't object, and she is radiant with health and knows how to make sorghum butter on her own hook without any . . . uh . . . outside interference.

There is one other happy note. Mose got the fish. Remember? Little Allie's first husband who was "a one to take on about fish"? Well, Mose got it. I recognized that basket. It was the one he used to pick up and deliver wash in and we never saw it or the fish again. May it rest in peace.

AMEN.

LETTER TO AN INVISIBLE WOMAN

By Hannes Bok

● Not always need a letter have an obvious, visible destination, nor need it be transmitted by obvious means—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Mary Anne, darling, if you should ever come here—if you happen to be here now—please read this. I'm going to leave it here on my desk where you can't help seeing it—if you should look. And please don't just skip through the pages, because it's very important to me that you understand everything.

You probably remember the day when we first saw each other, but I wonder if you can recall it as clearly as I. It was during last March when my office force had only half an hour off for lunch, and I was hurrying to get back to work on time. There were a lot of other people hurrying, too, but you were out of their way on a corner, leaning against a store front waiting—I supposed—for a streetcar. I couldn't help staring at you—let's see, you were wearing a black fur coat that had a deep collar brushing your cheeks, and you hadn't a hat on. There was a red cloth flower pinned to your collar—not so red as your mouth.

You looked—it's hard to find proper words—as though once you had been a girl not much different from any of the usual run of girls—which includes too much make-up, dandruff, bridgework, and silly chatter. And then some magic wand had touched you, and your eyes grew larger as though they'd been held wide open by the sight of a miracle and stayed that way—like a deer's. They say that nearly all animals have large eyes and that it means sensuality.

You were terribly slender—not haggard or gaunt, but wispy, as though a sudden gust would snap you. Every move you made had a suggestion of supernatural vitality behind it—as though your bones were paper, your blood fire under a flesh of elastic velvet—like a human shell inhabited by conscious lightning.

I couldn't help looking at you, and as I passed, your eyes lingered on my mouth, and suddenly I felt a lingering ache in my front teeth and a tingling shock on my lips as though an electric hand had slapped them. I stopped stock-still, startled, my eyes still fixed on where you had been—for you were no longer there! You had vanished without a movement into nothingness! As I stood, startled, people bumped into me, stared curiously, and I was embarrassed and hurried on.

And then the time when Irene McMichael brought you down to the office and introduced us! There was a saucy look in your eye as you mentioned things about me that I had supposed were unknown to anyone, and you laughed merrily at my confusion. While Irene and I glanced at each other during the course of the conversation, we looked up to find you gone. Then abruptly not only my lips tingled and teeth hurt, but my scalp ached as though every separate hair had been jerked—and you were standing behind us, amused at my amazement, talking on and on—very cleverly, too.

I don't recall whether it was on that same day or later that Mrs. St. John's filing cabinet was turned all topsy-turvy in a clock's tick as though lightning might have struck it. But nothing was damaged. It was as if someone had leisurely and impishly gone through it, throwing things helter-skelter while in search of something. Was that your doing? Were you looking—as I hope, even though it sounds conceited—for information about me?

It must have been you, because Irene swears that she never told you where I lived or anything about me—and that information and more was in Mrs. St. John's files. Or did you shadow me home one night?

On the day we were introduced, before you left the office, you invited me up to your apartment, and when I called I was surprised to see the paintings which you had made! Water colors, you said, but I had never seen—nor probably will ever see again—anything like them. I can imagine their creation only by picturing you at work with time standing still, your slim hands wielding a wiry brush with water become oily and stiff, blending colors which ordinarily dry almost immediately—painting the entire picture wet. No wonder there is such a demand for your work and you receive the prices you set!

Then we went walking in the moonlight along the wet beach. You whispered mockingly, "I suppose you're wishing that tonight could last forever!" and then there was a jerk, as at the cinema when the film has been torn and badly patched, with some of the little pictures left out—for suddenly, unaccountably, you were several steps ahead of me and waiting for me to catch up with you.

Remember my surprised question: "How did you get there so quickly?"

You answered, "It's cold—let's go inside where it's warm." You'd been alert and enthusiastic a moment before, and now you were as bored and listless as at the end of an exhausting day.

As we turned to go, I noticed our tracks over my shoulder. We had been the only people on the sand since the tide had run out—yet something was wrong with our footprints. In one place, your smaller ones left mine, wandered to the water's edge, straggled off the sand into the woods and back to mine again, even though—except for that short, inexplicable jump ahead of me—we had been side by side all the time.

You turned, too, and asked sharply, "What are you looking for?"

I should have lied and said that I was watching the moon, instead of, "But how could you have gone such a distance in so short a time?"

And you betrayed yourself with, "You've been talking about me with Irene! She's the only one who *knows!*"

And then whenever I called at your studio, you weren't in. And I began to dream about you—like the temptations of the early Christian hermits. Sometimes at home I'd feel a sudden draft as though a door were opening or closing. My lips would tingle, as though kissed by a phantom, and sometimes at night I'd dream that you were near, seeing your eyes staring catlike at me from shadows—and more and more I knew that I was in love with you.

But no matter how often I tried to see you, I never could find you at home. Nor would I receive any reply to the letters I sent you. So at last I went to Irene to ask for her help. It was your doing: if you hadn't accused me of pumping

information from Irene, I would never have thought of going to her.

She told me what she knew about you—that you'd been through school together, and that you had always been rather plain. Then one day your automobile skidded off a bridge and the people who saw it fall observed you swimming toward shore almost before hitting the water. Irene says that you explained it in this way: that when your car struck bottom you were still conscious, but the water, rushing inside, frightened you terribly. You knew you'd have to get out of one of the doors, but for all your efforts, they wouldn't open. You went wild with terror, realizing that it was either making the most of every second—or death.

Sometimes a second can seem like years—when you're anxious, or in pain, or lonely—and in some way you stretched a few seconds into a much longer space during your desperate attempts to escape. We never know the extent of our powers until we're called upon to use them: scientists are only beginning to learn the wonders of the human mind. You accelerated your actions to a state many times more rapid than normal, cramming a minute's action into a second's—in other words, practically made time stand still—like the story of the house painter who hurried feverishly at his job because he wanted to finish it before he'd used up all his paint.

You kicked a hole through a window of the car and forced yourself out against the influx of oddly gelatinous water; you swam to shore as though through coldly molten green glass. To those who watched, it was almost instantaneous; to you, many minutes.

I believe that once you discovered this means of speeding your existence and so apparently lengthening time, you practiced it, learning more and more how to manage it with greater efficiency—until you were moving so swiftly among normal people that they saw you only as a blur. In time you could make yourself quite invisible by keeping constantly on the move. At such instances, your world must seem peopled by statues, windless and almost silent.

I envy you. I, too, have wished at times to halt the clock and wander in an everlasting sunset, touching flowers that will never fade, smiling at a sun that will never drop from sight. I've thought of the interest in peeping into homes where petrified people sit—and doing sly little things to torture someone who loved me.

Are you angry with me because I know your secret? I think that it must be only pride, because if you are angry there are so many unsuspected ways that you could punish—kill—Irene and me and insure your secret's safety.

Perhaps you have been reading as I write. If only I knew! Perhaps my dreams of you were not dreams at all, and you have been spending hours with me, watching and touching me. If only I could be sure that it were so, I would be very happy.

Let me come to you, or reveal yourself to me. Is it shyness that holds you back? At least leave me some sign—please!—to show that you love me.

Excuse the blot. I was dipping my pen in the ink and somehow the bottle tipped over.

Mary Anne, darling—please make some sign!

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

OUT OF THIS WORLD—

Was no swing-fan's slang to Gene—it was an accurate description of where he was. In a world of endless seas, and island peoples—in a world at war where a god and a demigod might be induced to aid. Where a half-reptilian being molded mud into manikins between his fingers—and the dolls walked away to do his bidding—

Sail with

THE SORCERER'S SHIP

By Hannes Bok

In the December UNKNOWN WORLDS *On sale October 23rd*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

ARE YOU RUN-DOWN, TIRED—

By Babette Rosmond Lake

● If you are, there may be decent limits even so to the potency of the curative methods you'd find desirable—

Illustrated by Orban

Monroe swallowed two of the shining brown capsules and smiled at his reflection in the mirror. He liked to smile at his reflection these days. His teeth were so dazzlingly white. His teeth. Since his tenth birthday he'd been accustomed to spending three months of every year writing down dentist appointments. Now—well, they looked like little oblong diamonds.

Stepping back, his elbow rubbed against the electric-light switch in the bathroom. The bulb overhead went out. Still, Monroe could easily discern, even in the total darkness, the gaily colored patterns on the rug. That was another amazing thing that had been happening—his astounding night vision. But then there had been all kinds of startling changes taking place in him ever since he had started taking the capsules. His appetite. His new-found strength. The slight glow he appeared to give off, strangely.

As he entered the dining room of the boarding-house, Monroe noticed that the chair on either side of his place was respectfully empty. Months ago, the other boarders would fight to see who'd get next to Monroe—double portions!—now they avoided him like the plague. Now he ate his meal in silence, ignoring the pointed stares of the others, and left the room. He felt a need for exercise. He *had* to have exercise. He picked up his hat and strode out of the house.

On the street, Monroe took a deep breath. A ripping sound rose behind him; simultaneously he felt the cool night air on his back. He knew what had happened. His jacket had ripped up the back again.

Monroe walked past the outskirts of the city and burst into a run. He galloped for three hours, with unslacking speed. Then, mildly tired, he turned back. His eye fell on a lunch car beside the road. Soon he was seated on one of the stools along the counter. He picked up a newspaper that was lying nearby and started to read it until the incredulous voice of the counterman interrupted him:

"Listen, mister. I don't know who or what you are, but whatever it is, get out of here! We had a short circuit in here fifteen minutes ago, and it's dark. It's dark, I tell you. And here you sit, reading a newspaper. Go on, now, get out!"

Monroe shrugged, and left the place. He started to walk again. These nocturnal walks were not new. On his first night in the city—when he'd been an underweight, undersized little man—he'd been unable to sleep. He got out of bed, dressed, and walked about until he was tired enough to sleep. Three or four nights a week, he'd do it. That was how he met—the man.

It had been a late spring night. He was walking through unfamiliar sections when he saw wisps of smoke drifting through a partially open door. Monroe, who had been leader of the fire drills in P. S. 12, in Keokuk, and who knew enough to keep his head at such time, inconvenient though it might be, looked up and down the street for a fire-alarm box. Then he looked for a policeman. Then he looked for a passing motorist to spread the alarm. But there was nothing and nobody around. Nobly, Monroe filled his lungs with air, pushed open the door and lunged into the house. There was just a room, with a thin stream of smoke rising in it. It issued from a round metal brazier standing on three thin legs in the center of the room. Silhouetted against the smoke, his back to Monroe, was a tiny, bandy-legged man. He wore a robe stretching to the ground. Without turning, the little man motioned Monroe to a couch against the wall.

Tentatively, Monroe sank to the edge of the couch. Intermittent licks of flame from the brazier lit up the room. He noticed that the blaze reflected itself in gold embroidery on the little man's robe. Tiny dancing goats surrounded by crescent moons were traced on its border, and

a confusion of other small beasts rose up its back.

The little man turned:

"I'm glad you could come. Awfully glad. I was afraid no one would."

Monroe stared. He could feel his knees shaking.

The man whipped out a little pad of paper and wrote with a pencil which appeared out of nothing. "Vitamin B," he noted, "excellent for nerves. What else seems to bother you?"

Monroe thought for a minute. He loved to talk about his ailments.

"Well," he said, happily, "I have a miserable appetite, I *never* sleep, I have bad teeth, I had a case of rickets when I was a baby that left my bones soft—"

"Wonderful," said the little man, rubbing his hands. "I think we'll try the whole Vitamin B complex on you, plus the other vitamins, of course. Just vitamins. No spells. They're old-fashioned. Vitamins are good for what ails you. And you need them all, if I ever saw anyone who did. Oh, thank the kind fates that sent you to me!"

The pad disappeared from the tiny hand and in its place was a dark-brown bottle which was extended toward Monroe. Monroe looked hesitant. Actually, he looked stupid.

"Don't be a sucker," said the little man, smiling. "You'd pay a fortune for these in a drug-store. Highly concentrated. My God, you don't know how highly concentrated these vitamins are. Take them. My compliments. I've got a point to prove, too. Come in again when these run out."

Monroe found the brown bottle in his hand. More surprisingly, he found himself out on the street. He thought he saw a wisp of smoke, but a fog had arisen, and he couldn't be sure. He shrugged, turned, and returned to the boarding-house with the bottle.

When he reached his room, the bottle clutched tightly in his palm, he closed the door care-

fully. He started to undress, and a cold draft hit him as he took off his shirt. His nose felt ticklish, and he sneezed. His head obligingly started to ache. He looked at the bottle. A label seemed to have grown on it. It said: DON'T BE A SUCKER. TAKE TWO RIGHT AWAY AND PULL THE COVERS OVER YOUR HEAD.

Monroe unscrewed the cap and let two shining little capsules roll into his hand. He swallowed them, got into bed, and lay there, prepared to spend another night thinking and telling himself that he had all the power in the world and could electrocute anybody he wanted to and that he was married to Madeleine Carroll. But as soon as his head touched the pillow—as other, more fortunate, people used to tell *him*—he fell asleep.

He awakened at eight in the morning, and tried tentatively to breathe through his nose. Amazing! He could. His head felt fine. He looked at the bottle on the dresser. The label was still there, only now it said: SEE? NOW WAIT UNTIL YOU NEED SOME MORE.

He turned the bottle over. There was nothing else on it. (What about the Pure Food & Drug Act, he asked himself.) No maker's name, no description of contents, nothing.

He bathed and dressed and then went downstairs to the dining room for his usual morning dish of prunes—two prunes. He ate them quickly, and as he did so, Mrs. Henk, the landlady, came into the room with a plate of hot biscuits. Monroe hesitated—then he reached for one.

"Why, Mr. Featherstonehaugh," said Mrs. Henk, "you know what that's going to do to your stomach. My! Aren't you foolish?"

"Mrs. Henk," said Monroe, with dignity, "a man needs more than two prunes in his stomach if he's to do a day's work, if you'll pardon the expression." His voice sounded vibrant, rich. He finished another biscuit and then, as an afterthought, ate an apple, a banana, and two pieces of bacon that happened to be around.

The day passed quickly. It was a lovely day. Mr. Jordan, the president of the Jordan Optical Co., complimented Monroe on the speed with which he wrote his little figures down on bookkeeping sheets. Monroe also noticed that Gloria Ringle, Mr. Jordan's secretary, looked his way a few times. He felt good about it.

That night Monroe looked at the bottle before he went to bed. The label said: TAKE TWO NOW. ARE YOU TIRED AND RUN-DOWN? DO YOU STAND THERE FOOLISHLY DIGGING YOUR TOE IN THE SAND WHILE THE OTHER GUYS GRAB OFF THE BEST JOBS AND THE BEST GIRLS? YOU DON'T HAVE TO STAND FOR THAT, BUD. GO ON, TAKE TWO NOW.

So Monroe took two.

Morning. The sun was shining. Monroe jumped out of bed, stretched, and burst into song. While he was shaving, he noticed that his beard was getting heavier. His skin looked golden. His eyes— Ah! How keen, how piercing they were. He'd read somewhere that people gave night drivers raw carrots to eat so that they could see in the dark. Raw carrots, bah! Last night he'd found that he could read the large print in a magazine ad, in the pitch-dark. How wonderful a creature was Monroe Featherstonehaugh!

He ate three eggs and five biscuits for breakfast, and noticed that Mrs. Henk preened herself coyly as he sat at table.

At the office, he tackled his accounting charts with a vengeance. At ten thirty he felt hungry, so he had a glass of milk at the lunch counter next door. Someone slipped into the seat beside him, and Monroe could tell it was Gloria Ringle. Who else could look so utterly lovely on one of those silly stools? He cared for Miss Ringle, he really did, even though he'd once heard her refer to him as the anti-Superman.

He turned to Miss Ringle and smiled.

"Gloria," he heard his new voice say, "where are we having dinner tonight?"

"Why, Mr. Featherstonehaugh," said Gloria. "I'd *love* having dinner with you. Any place you say."

Monroe cautiously left the office at three so he could go home and visit the bottle. The label stared him in the face brazenly: OH, BOY. A DATE WITH GLORIA. BETTER TAKE THREE, CHUM.

The evening was a brilliant success. Monroe and Gloria were, unmistakably, made for each other. They laughed at the same things, felt the same way about people in the office, both had had their tonsils out. Gloria liked a man with an appetite, and Monroe was the answer to her prayer.

But tonight, Monroe was worried. His encounter with the man at the lunch wagon had frightened him a little. After all, Vitamin A was well known as a factor in promoting better night vision, but there were decent limits to everything. He walked along, kicking at small objects in the road—which he could see with astonishing clarity—when suddenly a curl of smoke rose before him. Then an unlatched door appeared. It opened, revealing the familiar outline of the tiny man, absorbed in the flames rising from the brazier.

Monroe decided to come to the point.

"Look here, Mr. . . . er . . . I don't want you to think I'm not grateful, and I know you must be very busy with your . . . er . . . but—"

"Not at all," said the tiny man, briskly. "Glad

to help you. You see, it's a stupendous new project. Bringing the profession up to date. Revolutionizing wizardry. They're all crazy. Haven't learned and won't learn a thing for fifty million years. Still making with their witches and familiars and demons and magic circles. Bah! We've got to be streamlined, just like anybody else. And I say vitamins are the thing. Yep, vitamins—only fixed *my* way. A for sight, B for nerves, C for teeth, D for bones and sunshine—well, you know the rest. Now run along and take your pills and some day every school kid in the world will know you as the pioneer who first aided the cause of Vitamin Wizardry."

"But look," said Monroe, desperately, "I see too much. People are beginning to look at me. I mean, funny. I mean, I don't want to see at night. I don't want to be a wizard. Cut out the Vitamin A, will you?"

He thought he saw the tiny fists clench. Monroe was afraid that perhaps he'd been too forward. But the man only smiled.

"Certainly," said the wizard. "I'll leave out some of the A and increase another vitamin. Now don't worry. Just take this new prescription" —bottle appearing again, Monroe noted, wearily— "and be a happy man."

Monroe found himself on the street again. He tried to get his bearings, but there were no signs of any kind. The fog was getting thick. Monroe trudged through it back to the city. When he got to the boardinghouse, he climbed the stairs quickly and sank exhausted into bed. But not before taking two.

Later in the week, after a steady diet of the vitamin pills, Monroe and Gloria decided that any two people who were so obviously affinities should waste no time in announcing their engagement. Gloria went around telling people that she hadn't seen much in Monroe at first, but that he sort of grew on her. In fact, everything was wonderful except for what may be referred to politely as the Fluorescence of Monroe. And, lately, his colossal, unbounded, unprecedented, appetite.

Friday started off badly. Mrs. Henk served notice on Monroe that henceforth, if he wished to stay at her house, which had always been decent and respectable, he would have to go on an à la carte basis. Carrying him table d'hôte was costing her just ten times what he was paying her.

Monroe promised to give the matter careful consideration.

That afternoon, his stomach became quite unruly. Despite the black looks Gloria threw him as he hurried past her every five minutes, he could not restrain himself. He ate as he had never eaten before. Once, at the lunch counter, he caught sight of a napkin—

In the evening, he polished off an enormous meal at a restaurant which now advertises itself as the place where incredible gastronomic feats were performed by one M. Featherstonehaugh. Gloria sulked, and wouldn't say a word all the way to her apartment. No sooner had they got there when Monroe was in the kitchen. A box of saltines disappeared, a bottle of ketchup— still unsatisfied, Monroe returned to the living room.

Gloria, dressed in a wonderful shade of blue, was half reclining on the couch. Anyone else would have forgotten all about food. Even Monroe looked appreciative.

"Darling," he said, "your lips are like ripe, red berries. Your skin is like peaches. Your neck is like a stalk of celery—"

He didn't go on.

"Yes, it's a shame," Mrs. Henk repeated, for the hundredth time. "He took it real hard. From the day she ran off he just pined away. He was never the same. He just didn't care, didn't even take his medicine any more, though it did him such worlds of good. He threw the stuff out and just wouldn't eat."

"And they never found *her?* The one that ran off or disappeared or eloped, or something?"

"Not a trace," said Mrs. Henk, licking her lips and shaking her head at the shame of it all, "she just disappeared."

THE END.

NO FINER DRINK...*with fan...or player*

THE NEW ONE

By Fredric Brown

● Wally was all right—except that Darveth, King of the Fire Demons had him in his power. And Wally was, thereby, a pyromaniac—and a worker in a munitions plant, a new, raw plant with still-inadequate fire-control apparatus—

Illustrated by Orban

"Papa, are human beings real?"

"Hush, child."

"But *are* they?"

"Drat it, kid, don't they teach you those things in Ashtaroth's class? If they don't then what am I paying them ten B. T. U. a semester for?"

"Ashtaroth talks about it, papa. But I can't make much sense out of what he says."

"Um-m-m . . . Ashtaroth *is* a bit— Well, what does he say?"

"He says *they* are and *we* aren't; that we exist only because they believe in us, that we are fig . . . fig . . . something."

"Figments of their imagination?"

"That's it, papa. We're figments of their imagination, he says."

"Well, what's hard about that? Doesn't it answer your question?"

"But, papa, if we're not *real,* why are we here? I mean, how can—"

"All right, kid, I suppose I might as well take time out to explain this to you. But first, don't let these things worry you. They're academic."

"What's 'academic'?"

"Something that doesn't really matter. Somethings you got to learn so you won't be ignorant, like a dumb dryad. The real lessons, the ones you should study hard, are the ones you get in Lebalome's classes, and Marduk's."

"You mean red magic, and possession and—"

"Yeah, that sort of thing. Particularly the red magic; that's your field as a fire elemental, see? But to get back to this reality stuff. There are two kinds of . . . uh . . . stuff; mind and matter. You got that much clear now?"

"Yes, papa."

"Well, *mind* is higher than *matter,* isn't it? A higher plane of existence. Now things like rocks and . . . uh . . . like rocks are pure matter; that's the lowest kind of existence. Human beings are a kind of fork between mind and matter. They got both. Their bodies are matter like rocks and yet they got minds that run them. That makes them halfway up the scale, understand?"

"I guess so, papa, but—"

"Don't interrupt. Then the third and highest form of existence is . . . uh . . . us. The elementals and the gods and the myths of all kinds—the banshees and the mermaids and the afreets and the loups-garous and—well, everybody and everything you see around here. We're higher."

"But if we aren't *real,* how—"

"Hush. We're higher because we're pure thought, see? We're pure mind-stock, kid. Just like humans evolved out of nonthinking matter, we evolved out of them. They *conceived* us. Now do you understand?"

"I guess so, papa. But what if they quit believing in us?"

"They never will—completely. There'll always be some of them who believe, and that's enough. Of course the more of them believe in us, the stronger we are, individually. Now you take some of the older lads like Ammon-Ra and Bel-Marduk—they're kind of weak and puny these days because they haven't any real followers. They used to be big guns around here, kid. I remember when Bel-Marduk could lick his weight in harpies. Look at him today—walks with a cane. And Thor—boy, you should have heard *him* in a ruckus, only a few centuries ago."

"But what, papa, if it ever gets so nobody up there believes in them? Do they die?"

"Um-m-m—theoretically, yes. But there's one thing saves us. There are some humans who believe *anything.* Or anyway don't actually disbelieve in anything. That group is a sort of nucleus that holds things together. No matter how discredited a belief is, they hang on by doubting a little."

"But what, papa, if they conceive of a *new* mythological being? Would he come into existence down here?"

"Of course, kid. That's how we all got here, one time or another. Why, look at poltergeists, for instance. They're newcomers. And all this ectoplasm you see floating around and getting in the way, that's new. And—well, like this big guy Paul Bunyan; he's only been around here a century or so; he isn't much older than you are. And lots of others. Of course, they have to get *invoked* before they show up, but that always gets done sooner or later."

"Gosh, thanks, papa. I understand you a lot better than I did Ashtaroth. He uses big words like transmogrification and superactualization and what not."

"O. K., kid, now run along and play. But don't bring any of those darn water elemental kids back with you. The place gets so full of steam I can't see. And a very important personage is going to drop in."

"Who, papa?"

"Darveth, the head fire demon. The big shot himself. That's why I want you to run along outside."

"Gee, papa, can't I—"

"No. He wants to tell me about something important. He's got a human being on the string, and it's ticklish business."

"How do you mean, got a human being on the string? What's he want to do with him?"

"Make him set fires, of course, up there. What Darveth's going to do with this guy will be good. He says better than he did with Nero or Mrs. O'Leary's cow. It's something big on, this time."

"Gee, can't I watch?"

"Later, maybe. There's nothing to watch yet. This guy's still just a baby. But Darveth's farsighted. Get 'em young, that's his idea. It'll take years to work out, but it'll be hot stuff when it happens."

"Can I watch, then?"

"Sure, kid. But run along and play now. And keep away from those frost giants."

"Yes, papa."

It took twenty-two years for it to get him. He fought it off that long, and then—blooie.

Oh, it had been there all along, ever since Wally Smith was a baby; ever since—well, it was there before he could remember. Since he'd managed to stand on babyhood's thick stubby little legs, hanging on to two bars of his play pen, and

had watched his father take a little stick and rub it across the sole of his shoe and then hold it to his pipe.

Funny, those clouds of smoke that came from that pipe. They were there, and then they weren't, like gray phantoms. But that was merely interesting in a mild way.

What drew his eyes, his round wide wondering eyes, was the *flame*.

The thing that danced on the end of the stick. The thing that flared there, ever-shape-changing. Yellow-red-blue wonder, magic beauty.

One of his chubby hands clung to the bar of the play pen, and the other reached out for the *flame*. His; he wanted it. His.

And his father, holding it safely out of reach, grinning at him in proud and blind paternity. Never guessing.

"Pretty, huh, sonny? But mustn't touch. Fire *burn*."

Yes, Wally, fire *burns*.

Wally Smith knew a lot about fire by the time he was in school. He knew that fire burns. He knew it by experience, and it had been painful, but not bitter, experience. The scar was on his forearm to remind him. The blotchy white scar that would always be there when he rolled up his sleeves.

It had marked him in another way, too. His eyes.

That had come early, also. The sun, the glorious sun, the murderous sun. He'd watched that, too, when his mother had moved his play pen out into the yard. Watched it with breathless fascination until his eyes hurt, and had looked back at it again as soon as he could, and had stretched up his little arms toward it. He knew that it was fire, flame, somehow identical with the thing that danced on the end of the sticks his father held to his pipe.

Fire. He *loved* it.

And so, quite young, he wore glasses. All his life he was to be nearsighted and wear thickish glasses.

The draft board took one look at the thickness of those lenses and didn't even send him around for a physical examination. On the thickness of his lenses, they marked him exempt and told him to go home.

That was tough, because he *wanted* to get in. He'd seen a movie newsreel that showed the new flame throwers. If he could get one of *those* things to operate—

But that desire was subconscious; he didn't know that it was a big part of the reason he wanted to get into uniform. That was in the fall of '41 and we weren't *in* the war yet. Later, after December, it was still part of the reason he wanted to get in, but not the major part. Wally Smith was a good American; that was even more important than being a good pyromaniac.

Anyway, he'd licked the pyromania. Or thought he had. If it was there, it was buried down deep where most of the time he could avoid thinking about it, and there was a "Thus Far, No Farther" sign across one passage of his mind.

That yen for a flame thrower worried him a bit. Then came Pearl Harbor and Wally Smith had it out with himself to discover whether it was *all* patriotism that made him want to kill Japs, or whether that yen for a flame thrower figured at all.

And while he mulled it over, things got hotter in the Philippines and the Japs moved down Malaya to Singapore, and there were U-boats off both coasts and it began to look as though his country needed him. And there was a fighting anger in him that told him the hell with whether or not it was pyromania—it was patriotism even more, and he'd worry about the psychiatry of it later.

He tried three recruiting stations, and each of them bounced him back. Then the factory where he worked changed over and— But wait, we're getting a bit ahead of things.

When little Wally Smith was seven, they took him to a psychiatrist. "Yes," said the psychiatrist, "*pyromania*. Or anyway a strong tendency toward pyromania."

"And . . . uh . . . what causes it, doctor?"

You've seen that psychiatrist, lots of times. In yeast ads. Identified—probably correctly—as a famous Vienna specialist. Remember when there was that long line of famous Vienna specialists who advocated eating yeast for everything from moral turpitude to ingrowing toenails? That, of course, was before the Nazi steamroller crossed Austria and blood began to flow like *wein*. Well, make a composite picture in your mind of the Vienna yeast dynasty and you'll know how impressive that psychiatrist looked.

"And . . . uh . . . what causes it, doctor?"

"Emotional instability, Mr. Smith. Pyromania is not insanity, I wish you to understand. Not as long as it remains . . . ah . . . under control. It is a compulsion neurosis, predicated upon emotional instability. As to why the neurosis took that particular channel of expression; somewhere back in infancy there must have been a psychic trauma which—"

"A what, doctor?"

"A trauma. A wound to the psyche, the mind. Possibly in the case of pyromania, the suffering caused by a severe burn. You've heard the old saying, Mr. Smith, 'A burned child fears the fire.'"

And the psychiatrist smiled condescendingly and waved his wand—I mean, his pince-nez glasses on the black silk ribbon—in a gesture of

exorcism. "The truth is quite the converse, of course. The burned child *loves* the fire. Was young Wally ever burned, Mr. Smith?"

"Why, yes, doctor. When he was four he got hold of some matches and—"

There's the scar in plain sight on his arm, doc. Didn't you notice it? And surely a burned child loves the fire; else he probably wouldn't have been burned in the first place.

The psychiatrist failed to ask about pre-fire symptoms—but then he would merely have deprecated them had Mr. Smith remembered to tell him. He'd have assured you that such attraction toward flame is normal and that it didn't achieve abnormal proportions until after the episode of the burn. Once a psychiatrist is in full war paint on the traumata trail, he can explain such minor discrepancies without half trying.

And so the psychiatrist, having found the cause, cured him. Period.

* * * *

"Now, Darveth?"

"No, I'm going to wait."

"But it'd be fun to see that schoolhouse burn down. It'd burn easily, too, and the fire escapes aren't quite big enough."

"Uh-huh. But just the same, I'm going to wait."

"You mean he'll get a whack at something bigger later on?"

"That's the idea."

"But are you sure he won't wiggle off your hook?"

"Not *him.*"

* * * *

"Time to get up, Wally."

"All right, mamma." He sat up in bed, hair rumpled, and reached for his glasses so he could see her. And then: "Mamma, I had one of those dreams again last night. The thing that was all fire, and another one like it but different and not so big talking to it. About the schoolhouse and—"

"Wally, the doctor told you you mustn't talk about those dreams. Except when he asks you. You see, talking about them impresses them on your mind and you remember them and think about it, and then that makes you dream about them again. See, Wally boy?"

"Yes, but why can't I tell you—"

"Because the doctor said not, Wally. Now tell me what you did in school yesterday. Did you get a hundred in arithmetic again?"

Of course the psychiatrist took keen interest in those dreams; they were part of his stock in trade. But he found them confused, meaningless stuff. And you can't blame him for that; have you ever listened to a seven-year-old kid try to tell the plot of a movie he's seen?

It was hash, the way Wally remembered and told it: "—and then this big yellow thing sort of—well, it didn't do much then, I guess. And then the big one, the one that was taller than the other and redder, was talking to it something about fishing and saying he wouldn't wiggle off the hook, and—"

Sitting there on the edge of the chair looking at the psychiatrist through his thick-lensed glasses, his hands twisting tightly together and his eyes round and wide. But talking gibberish.

"My little man, when you sleep tonight, try to think about something pleasant. Something you like very much, like . . . uh—"

"Like a *bonfire,* doctor?"

"No! I mean, something like playing baseball or going skating."

They watched him carefully. Particularly, they kept matches away from him, and fire. His parents bought an electric stove instead of their gas one, although they couldn't really afford it. But then again, because of the danger of matches, his father gave up smoking and what he saved on tobacco paid for the stove.

Yes, he was cured all right. The psychiatrist took credit for that, as well as cash. At any rate, the more dangerous outward symptoms disappeared. He was still fascinated by fire, but what boy doesn't chase fire engines?

He grew up to be a fairly husky young man. Tall, if a bit gawkward. About the right build for a basket-ball player, except that his eyes weren't good enough to let him play.

He didn't smoke, and—after an experience or two—he decided that he didn't drink either. Drinking tended to weaken that barrier that said, "Thus Far, No Farther," across the blocked passage of his mind. That night he'd almost let go and set fire to the factory where he worked, days, as a shipping clerk. Almost, but not quite.

* * * *

"Now, Darveth?"

"Not yet."

"But, master, why wait longer? That's a big building; it's wood and its ramshackle, and they make celluloid novelties. And *celluloid*—you've seen celluloid burn, haven't you, Darveth?"

"Yes, it *is* beautiful. But—"

"You think there a bigger chance coming?"

"Think? I *know* there is."

* * * *

Wally Smith woke up with an awful hangover that next morning, and found there was a box of matches in his pocket. They hadn't been there when he'd started to drink the night before, and he didn't remember when or where he'd picked them up.

But it gave him the willies to think that he *had* picked them up. And it gave him the screaming meamies to wonder what he'd had in his mind when he'd put that box of matches in his pocket. He knew that he'd been on the ragged edge of

something, and he had a very frightening idea of what that something had been.

Anyway, he took the pledge. He made up his mind that he'd never, under any circumstances, drink again. He thought he could be sure of himself as long as he didn't drink. As long as his conscious mind was in control, he *wasn't* a pyromaniac, damn it, he *wasn't*. The psychiatrist had cured him of that when he was a kid, hadn't he? Sure he had.

But just the same there came to be a haunted look in his eyes. Luckily, it didn't show much, through his thick glasses. Dot noticed it, a little. Dot Wendler was the girl he went with.

And although Dot didn't know it, that night put another tragedy into his life, for Wally had been on the verge of proposing to her, but *now*—

Was it fair, he wondered, for him to ask a girl like Dot to marry him when he was no longer quite sure? He almost decided to give her up and not torture himself by seeing her again. That was a bit too much though; he compromised by continuing to date her but not popping the question. A bit like a man who dares not eat, but who stares into delicatessen windows every chance he gets.

Then it got to be December 7th in the year of 1941, and it was on the morning of the 9th that he tried to enlist, in three recruiting stations and was turned down in each.

Dot tried to console him—although down in her heart she was glad. "But Wally, I'm sure the factory you work for will switch over to defense work. All the ones like it are changing. And you'll be just as helpful. The country needs guns and . . . and ammunition and stuff just as much as it needs soldiers. And—" She wanted to say, and it would give him a chance to settle down and marry her, but of course she didn't say it.

It was early in January that she was proved right. He was laid off during an interim period while the factory changed over. There was two weeks of that; the first week a happy vacation because Dot took a week off work, too, and they went everywhere together. She took the week off without pay, just to be with him, but she didn't tell him that.

Then at the end of two weeks, he was called back to work. They'd made the change-over rather quickly; it doesn't require as much changing and retooling for a factory working with chemicals as for one working in metals.

They were going to nitrate toluene. And when toluene has been so treated, they call it trinitrotoluene when they have the time. When they haven't time for a mouthful of syllables like that, TNT describes it just as well.

* * * *

"Now, Darveth?"

"Now!"

By noon that day, Wally Smith didn't know what was wrong with him, but he knew he didn't feel so well, mentally. *Something* was wrong with him, and getting wronger.

He went out onto the loading platform against the railroad spur to eat his lunch. There were a dozen cars on the spur, and ten men were working through the lunch hour at unloading one of them. Stuff in sacks that looked heavy.

"What is it?" Wally called over to one of the men.

"Just cement. For the fireproofing."

"Oh," said Wally. "When do they start on that?"

The man put down his sack and ran the back of a dirty hand across his forehead. "Tomorrow. Know how they're handling this job?" He grinned. "Tear down one wall at a time and pour a cement one. Right while they keep on running full blast."

"Um-m-m," said Wally. "All those cars full of cement?"

"Naw, just this one. Those others are chemicals and stuff. Gosh, I'll feel a lot easier when they get this place fixed up. Right now— You know this'd be worse than Black Tom in the last war if anything went wrong this week. That stuff in the cars alone would blow the fire clear over to the oil-cracking plants across the tracks. And you know what's on the other side of them?"

"Yes," said Wally. "Course they got lots of guards and everything, but—"

"But is right," said the man. "We need munitions in a hurry all right, but they got stuff too concentrated around here. This isn't any place to monkey with trinitro anyway. It's too near other stuff. If this plant *did* go up, even with all the precautions they're taking, it'd set off a chain of—" He looked narrowly at Wally Smith. "Say, we're talking too damn much. Don't say anything like what we been saying outside the plant."

Wally nodded, very soberly.

The workman started to heft the sack, and then didn't. He said, "Yeah, they're taking precautions. But one damn spy in here could practically lose the war for us. If he had luck. I mean, if it spread; there's enough stuff right near here to . . . well, damn near to swing the balance in the Pacific, kid."

"And," said Wally, "there'd be a lot of people killed, I guess."

"Nuts to people. Maybe a thousand people get killed, what does that matter? That many get killed on the Russian front every day. More. But, Wally— Hell, I talk too much."

He swung the sack of cement back onto his shoulder and went on into the building.

Wally finished his lunch, thoughtfully, and

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wadded up the paper it had been wrapped in and put it into the fireproof metal trash can. He glanced at his wrist watch and saw there was ten minutes left. He sat down again on the edge of the platform.

He knew what he ought to do. Quit. Even if there was one chance in a million that— But there wasn't a chance, even in a million. Damn it, he told himself, he'd been *cured*. He was O. K. And they needed him here; his job was important, in a small way.

But listen—just in case—how's about going back to that psychiatrist he'd used to go to? The guy was still in town. Tell him the whole story and take his advice; if he said to quit, then—

And he could call him up now, from the office phone, and make an appointment for this evening. No, not the office phone, but there was a nickel phone in the hall. Did he have a loose nickel? Yes, he remembered now; he did.

He stood up and reached into his change pocket, pulled out the change there. Four pennies, and he looked at them curiously. How the deuce had he got those pennies? There'd been a nickel—

He reached into his other pocket, and his hand froze there.

His fingers had touched cardboard, cardboard shaped like a folder of paper matches. Scarcely daring to breathe, he let his fingers explore the foreign object in his pocket. Unmistakably it *was* a folder of safety matches, a full one, and there was another one below it. And didn't those matches sell two folders for a penny—the missing penny from his nickel that had turned into four cents in change?

But he hadn't put them there. He *never* bought or carried matches. He hadn't—

Or *had* he?

Because he remembered now, the queer thing that had happened this morning on his way to work. That funny feeling when, with mild surprise, he'd found himself on the corner of Grant and Wheeler streets, a block off his regular route to work. A block out of his way, and he didn't remember walking that block.

Getting absent-minded, he'd told himself. Daydreaming. But there were stores along that block, stores that sold matches.

A man can daydream himself into walking a block out of his way. But can he make a purchase—one with fearful connotation like that—without knowing it?

And if he could *buy* matches without conscious volition, couldn't he also *use*—

Maybe even before he could get out of here!

Quick, Wally, while you know what you're doing, while you *can*—

He took the two folders of matches from his pocket and pushed them through the slide of the fireproof trash can.

And then, walking rapidly and with his face white and set, he went back into the building, down the long corridor to the shipping office, and went in.

He said, "Mr. Davis, I quit."

The bald-headed man at the desk looked up, mild surprise on his mild face. "Wally, what's wrong? Has something happened or . . . are you well?"

Wally tried to straighten out his face and make it feel as though it looked natural. He said, "I . . . I just quit, Mr. Davis. I can't explain." He turned to walk on out.

"But, Wally, you *can't*. Lord, we're shorthanded as it is. And you know your department, Wally. It'll take weeks to get a man broken in to take your place. You've got to give us notice to pull something like this. A week, at the very least, so we can break in a—"

"No. I quit right now. I *got* to—"

"But— Hell, Wally, that's *deserting*. Man, you're *needed* here. This is just as important as . . . as the Bataan front. This factory is as important as a whole damn fleet in the Pacific. It's . . . you know what we're doing here. And—What are you quitting for?"

"I . . . I'm just quitting, that's all."

The bald-headed man at the desk stood up and his face wasn't mild any more. He was a little over five feet tall, to Wally's six, but for the moment he seemed to tower over the younger man. He said, "You're going to tell me what's back of this, or I'm going to—" He was coming around the desk while he talked, and his fists were doubled at his sides.

Wally took a step backward. He said, "Listen, Mr. Davis, you don't understand. I don't *want* to quit. I *got*—"

* * * *

"Hey, where's Darveth? Get Darveth right away!"

"He's over chewing the fat with Apollo. The Greek's trying to talk him out of this because Greece is on America's side and wants them to win, but Apollo—and all the rest of 'em—aren't strong enough any more to buck—"

"Shut up. *Hey, Darveth!*"

"Yes?"

"This pyromaniac of yours; he's going to *talk*. They'll lock him up if he does and he won't be able to—"

"Shut up; I see."

"Hurry! You're going to lose—"

"Shut up so I can concentrate. Ah, I got him."

* * * *

"Listen, Mr. Davis, I . . . I didn't mean it that way at all. I got such a splitting headache, I just couldn't think straight and I didn't know what I was saying. I was just saying anything to get out of here, so I could go—"

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"Oh, that's different, Wally. But why *quit*, just because you got a headache? Sure, leave now and go to your doctor. But come back—today or tomorrow or next week, whenever it's O. K. again. Man, you don't have to quit just to go home, if you're sick."

"All right, Mr. Davis. Sorry I gave that impression. I wasn't thinking straight. I'll be back as soon as I can. Maybe even today."

That's it, Wally, you got him fooled now. Tell him you're going to see a doc, and that'll give you an excuse to go out for a while. That'll let you buy some more matches, because you couldn't get the ones back you put in the trash box, not without attracting attention.

You're going out to get more matches, and you know what you're going to do with them, don't you, Wally? You're going to lose a thousand lives and a billion dollars' worth of materials and lots of valuable *time* off the armament program, but it'll be a beautiful fire, Wally. The whole sky will be red, red as blood, Wally.

Tell him—

"Look, Mr. Davis, I've had these headaches before. They're sharp and awful while they last, but they last only a few hours. Tell you what; I can come back at five and work four hours then to make up for this afternoon. That be all right?"

"Why, sure—if you're feeling all right by then and are sure it won't hurt you. We *are* behind, and every hour you can put in counts."

"Thanks, Mr. Davis. I'm sure I can. So long."

* * * *

"Nice work getting out of that one, Darveth. And *night* will be better anyway."

"Night is always better."

"Boy, oh, boy. I'm sure going to be around to watch. Remember Chicago? And Black Tom? And Rome?"

"This will top them."

"But those Greeks, Hermes and Ulysses and that gang. Won't they get together maybe and try to stop it? And some of the legends from other countries on that side might join in. You ready for trouble, Darveth?"

"Trouble? Phooey, nobody believes in those mugs enough to give them any power. I could push 'em all off with my little finger. And look who'd help us, if they did start trouble. Siegfried and Sugimoto and that gang."

"And the Romans."

"The Romans? No, they're not interested in this war. They don't like Mussolini much. No, there won't be trouble. One of my imps could handle the whole gang."

"Swell. Save me a box seat, Darveth."

* * * *

Night was strange. At seven o'clock, when he'd been working two hours, it began to get dark. And it seemed to Wally Smith that darkness itself was something alien.

He knew, with part of his mind, that he was working, just as he always worked. He knew that he talked and joked with the other men on the shift. Men he knew well because he'd often before worked several hours overtime and thus overlapped the evening shift.

His body worked without his own volition. He picked up things that should be picked up, and put them down where they should be put down, and he made out cards and file memos and bills of lading. It was as though his hands worked of themselves and his voice spoke of itself.

There was another part of Wally Smith that must have been the real part. It seemed to stand back at a distance and watch his body work and listen to his voice speak. A Wally Smith that stood helpless on the edge of an abyss of horror. Knowing, now. The wall pushed through, knowing everything. About Darveth.

And knowing that at nine o'clock, on his way out of the building he would pass that corner room where he'd carefully planted the heap of rubbish. Highly inflammable rubbish; stuff that would catch fire from a single match and flare high, setting fire to the wall behind it before anyone would even know it was there. And *behind* that wall—

There were only two things left to do. Turn the handle that shut off the sprinkler system. Light one match—

One yellow-flaming match, then the red hell of consuming fire. Holocaust. Fire they could never stop, once it was started. Building after building turning to flame-red; body after body turning to charred black as men, killed or stunned by the explosions, cooked in a flaming hell.

It was a strange mix-up, the mind of Wally Smith. Nightmare visions that seemed familiar because he'd seen them in dreams when he was a child. Fantastic beings that he'd never been able to describe or identify, as a child. But now he knew, at least vaguely, who and what they were. Things out of myth and legend. Things that *weren't*.

But that *were*, somehow, in that nightmare plane.

He even heard them—not their voices, but their thoughts expressed in no language. And names, sometimes, that were the same in any language. Over and again, the name Darveth, and somehow it was something of fire named Darveth that was making him do what he was doing and going to do.

He saw and heard and felt, in loathing terror, while his hands made out shipping tickets and his voice cracked casual jokes with the other men around him.

And watched the clock. A minute to nine.

Wally Smith yawned. "Well," he said, "guess I'll call it a night. So long, boys."

He walked over to the clock, put his time card into the slot, and punched out.

Put on his hat and coat. Started down the hallway.

Then he was out of sight of the others, and not yet in sight of the guard at the door, and his movements were suddenly stealthy. He walked like a panther as he turned in at the door of the deserted stock room. The room where everything was ready.

Here it comes. The match was in his hand; his hand was striking the match. The *flame.* As the first flame he had ever seen, dancing on the end of a match in his father's hand. While Wally's stubby little fingers, all those years ago, had reached out for the thing on the end of the stick. The thing that flared there, ever-shape-changing; yellow-red-blue wonder, magic beauty. The *flame.*

Wait until the stick has caught fire, too, wait until it's well ablaze, so stooping down won't blow it out. A flame's a tender thing, at first.

"No!" cried another part of his mind. *"Don't!* Wally, *don't—"*

But you can't stop now, Wally, you can't "don't" because Darveth, the fire demon, is in the driver's seat. He's stronger than you are, Wally; he's stronger than any of the others in that nightmare world you're looking into. Yell for help, Wally, it won't do you any good.

Yell to any of them. Yell to old Moloch; he won't listen to you. He's going to enjoy this, too. Most of them are. Not all. Thor's standing to one side, not particularly happy about what's going to happen because he's a fighting man, but he isn't big enough to tangle with Darveth. None of them are, over there.

Fire's king, and all the fire elementals are dancing a dervish dance. Others watching. There's white-bearded Zeus and someone with a head like a crocodile standing beside him. And Dagon riding Scylla—all the creatures men have conceived, and conceiving—

But none of them will help you, Wally. You're on your own. And you're bending over now, with the match. Shielding it with your palm so it won't blow out in the draft from the open door.

Silly, isn't it, Wally, that you're being driven to this by something that can't really be there, something that exists only because it's *thought* of? You're mad, Wally. Mad. Or are you?—isn't *thought* as real a thing as anything? What are *you* but thought harnessed to a chunk of clay? What are *they* but thought, unharnessed?

Yell for help, Wally. There must be help somewhere. Yell, not with your throat and lips because they aren't yours right now, but with your mind! Yell for help where it will do good, *over there. Somebody* to stop Darveth. Somebody that would be on your side.

YES! That's it! YELL!

How he got home, afterward and an hour later, Wally never quite remembered. Only that the sky was black with night and studded with stars, not a scarlet sky of holocaust. He scarcely felt the burns on his thumb and forefinger where the match had burned down and burned out against his skin.

His landlady was in her rocking chair on the cool porch. She said, "Home so early, Wally?"

"Early?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you say this morning that you had a date with that girl of yours? I thought you ate downtown and went right to her house from the plant."

Wally, panic-stricken in remembering, was running to the telephone. A frantic moment and then he heard her voice.

"Wally, what happened? I've been waiting since—"

"Sorry, Dot—had to work late and couldn't phone. Can I come around now, and will you marry me?"

"Will I— What did you say, Wally?"

"Honey, it's all right now. Will you marry me?"

"Why— You come on over and I'll tell you, Wally. But what do you mean, it's all right now?"

"It's . . . I'll be right over, and tell you."

But reason reasserted itself in the six blocks he had to walk, and of course he didn't tell her what had happened. He thought up a story that would cover what he'd said—and one that she'd believe. Of such stuff are good husbands made, and Wally Smith was ready to make a good one if he got his chance. And he did.

* * * *

"Papa."

"Hush, child."

"But why, papa? And what are you doing under the bed?"

"Shhh. Oh, all right, but talk softly. He's still around somewhere, I think."

"Who, papa?"

"The new one. The one that— Grief, child, did you sleep through all the rumpus last night? The biggest fight here in seventeen centuries!"

"Gee, papa! Who licked who?"

"The new one. He kicked Darveth so far he hasn't got back yet, and then a bunch of Darveth's friends ganged up on him and he knocked hell out of *them.* Now he's walking around out there and—"

"Looking for somebody else to beat up, papa?"

"Well, I don't know. He hasn't started a fight

with anybody yet except the ones that started after him, except Darveth. I guess he took on Darveth because this human being Darveth was working on must have called him."

"But why are *you* hiding, papa?"

"Because— Well, kid, I'm a fire elemental, of course, and he may think I'm a friend of Darveth's, and I'm not taking any chances till things quiet down. See? Golly, there must be a flock of people up there on this guy's side and believing in him to make him as strong as that. What he did to Darveth—"

"What's his name, papa? And is he a myth or a legend or what?"

"Don't know, kid. Me, I'm going to let somebody else ask him first."

"I'm going to look out through the curtain, papa. I'll keep my glow down to a glimmer."

"Hey, come— Oh, all right, but be careful. Is he in sight?"

"Yes; I guess it's him. He doesn't *look* dangerous, but—"

"But don't take any chances, kid. I'm not even going near the window to look out; I'm brighter than you and he'd see me. Say, I didn't get much of a look last night in the dark. What does he look like by day?"

"Not dangerous-*looking*, papa. He's got a white goatee and he's tall and thinnish, and he's got red-and-white-striped pants stuffed into boots. And a stovepipe hat; it's blue and got white stars on it. Red, white and blue. Does that mean anything, papa?"

"From what happened last night, kid, it *must*. Me, I'm staying under the bed until somebody else asks him what his name is!"

THE END.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

AND I, ONE LIFE TOO LATE

By Ruth Stewart Schenley

Lost
Like Vanderdecken vainly making for the Cape
A voyage with no port—no purpose—no escape.

Lost
Like Mu and Atlantis and the proud dark stars
In this ruthless shuffling of mortal avatars.

Lost
My Beloved, all the enchantment of the lucent moon,
The splendor of the sun—the rest is gloom;
Because you were born one life too soon,
I stand, too moved for tears, bereft and dumb beside your tomb.

THE LIE

By Richard Louis

● There is one time when a man can tell a lie—if he doesn't believe in consequences —and be believed without question. When he is dying, no man is expected to lie—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Cargan watched the nurse go out, his expressionless face concealing the activity of his mind. One hour? Two? Not much longer for him, that was pretty certain. So all right; he had maybe half an hour to get the details straight and—damn, his thoughts were getting slow. They'd be slow all right in another two hours; they'd be stopped forever. Somewhere behind his gambler's mask a grin tickled across his mind, for therein lay the essence and keystone of the plan—his mind, his thoughts, his ego would be stopped forever. But so long as convention held that they wouldn't be stopped, that he'd have some sort of consciousness after that—deadline it was, in real fact—what statements he made now would carry an unimpeachable force.

Damn, he was wandering again.

So he had maybe two hours at most. Get back

to it. He had facts, some everybody knew, some only he—and one other who sure as blazes wasn't going to talk about it—knew. And he had to make a story that fitted all the facts everybody knew, and was a nice, neat, polished lie.

Wilson owed him that debt; everybody knew he'd gambled at Cargan's Casino, and there were notes to prove the debt. And if Wilson had said he couldn't pay just then, there'd be plenty to prove he couldn't—not with his art-castings plant as hopelessly out of business as priorities had made it. Who in blazes wanted hunks of bronze like fat babies or old dames or slinky mutts, anyway? Well, they weren't getting 'em now, anyway, and Wilson wasn't getting money, either.

So Wilson had a motive, and Wilson—as anybody could prove—had called on Cargan asking for time. And Wilson—as anybody including a dimwitted D. A. could prove—had left Cargan's office and five minutes later Cargan had crawled to the buzzer and called help. So Wilson was a murderer.

Nice—only everybody knew Wilson was a nice, snooty guy who won Bibles in Sunday school when he was a kid, and took honors at college and everybody liked him, and he *couldn't* be a murderer.

Well, so he wasn't—but nobody but Cargan and that other rat that climbed in the window knew it. Damn, getting mad about what he'd gotten for that hot ice Cargan fenced for him. Did he think he was selling on the open market?

Whoa, there; it's too late to get sore about that. Sholtz did it and he got away, and he was a rat—but the point was to get Wilson. Sholtz's silenced gun would take care of that—with a little help from Cargan.

Everything checked; Sholtz wasn't going to talk for sure, he came and went through a window. His shot had been soundless—almost painless, too; funny a guy could be killed without being hurt as much as a bee sting did. But mud packs were supposed to take the sting out of—

Wandering! Damn it, tie down, tie down while you've got time, or you'll be telling the truth to the D. A., and Wilson'll go on all safe and happy.

Cargan writhed slightly. The trouble was Wilson wasn't a rat, or a crook, or anything. He wasn't even a white-livered prissy. He was a hell of a lot better man than Cargan, which Cargan knew and hated with a supremer hate, intensified by the factor that had twisted the last half-dozen years of his life. Ann had known it, too, and gone to Wilson, not to the playboy, semi-professional small-time gambler.

Cargan's professional mask cracked in a grimace of a twisted grin. So—with one lie, and the help of two thousand years of convention, Wilson was going to be slapped down—hard. And the lousy cops would do it for him!

Just because people thought that a man wouldn't die with a lie on him, because they thought there was something after death where the balance was struck. Thought? Thought nothing—they hoped, the damn suckers. Thought there would be because they wanted it, thought it for the same reason and in the same way they thought they'd win, even when Cargan had the wheels rigged better than one hundred fifty to one against them. Well—he'd been on the other end of the wheel rigging, and he knew you couldn't win. The sucker always got hooked; when you died, as he was going to in just about—about an hour and a half now—it was just what it looked like. It was the end, the complete and total blackout. Finis.

Finis. That was Latin wasn't it? Like back in high, when Ann had made him repeat that dumb *tuba-tubas-tu*—

Wandering! Time, and more than time to call that D. A. before he forgot the lie altogether. He groped for the bell push. Funny—couldn't feel it; couldn't—couldn't feel the sheet! Frantically he grabbed, plucked, found it finally and stabbed at the button with a twisted grimace of panic hate.

Then he relaxed and lay very still, saving up till the nurse came, and then the D. A., and going over his story very carefully—

The D. A. had a girl with a shorthand pad and a dozen pencils with him when he bustled in.

"Hospital said you wanted me, Cargan."

The gambler's eyes rolled over toward him laboriously. Cargan meant to put on some show, and grew suddenly desperate when he realized it wasn't more than half show. This was going to be close—damned close. Remember that story—get it straight—

The D. A. looked down at him keenly and with interest. Cargan wasn't a big or important criminal—just a mean little ward rotten spot. And little criminals were apt to be more vicious than the really big ones. Cargan might have something interesting to give—

"Yeah." Cargan stopped and tried to breathe deeper. Somehow it didn't help much. "I was . . . gonna get that guy. But I can't. He got me I guess. Wilson, Richard Wilson. He owed me for some gambling. Yeah. You know I've got wheels down there. He wanted more time." Vaguely Cargan brushed at his eyes; it was getting smoky in here. "And when I didn't. It felt like a bee sting. Funny little pop and a bee sting."

"Who shot you, Cargan?" The D. A. leaned forward; the man was obviously about gone.

"Sholtz," Cargan murmured vaguely. Then abruptly the mists cleared away, and a bitter, savage anger at his own weakness stung him to a near full consciousness. "I mean . . . shots . . . shot. Richard Wilson shot me. I want to get that guy."

The D. A. snapped at him. "Who? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Wilson. Shot me with a pop gun. Silencer. It knocked me out; I had to crawl to the button."

Cargan's face twisted again in a grin. He'd finished the lie; the job was done, and Wilson tied and delivered. A deathbed confession no less—and nobody lies when they're dying.

The blackness seemed to roll up over him in waves, submerging him and the satisfaction as he relaxed in the knowledge he'd done the job up brown. He'd killed Wilson as neatly as if he'd shot him, and now—he had nothing to worry about. Dead men don't have to worry.

* * * * *

Cargan's worry started when he woke in his coffin.

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE DARKEST PATH

By Arte Harbison

I ran—and ran my very best
up there where the dim paths wind,
For I knew, O very well indeed,
that a Demon ran behind.
I ran around a cypress tree,
the Demon was just behind,
And face to face he met with me
—up where the dim paths wind.

Ah! no one knows of that hidden vale
where we met, my Demon and I
And never left till the moon was pale,
and low in the western sky—
Ah! no one heard the awful moans
as my Demon screamed and died—
And high are my hopes,
for his shadow lopes
no longer by my side.

I can gibber and scream to the moon alone
and remember what was said,
That last long night in the pale moonlight—
I am glad that my Demon is dead.

THE GODDESS' LEGACY

By Malcolm Jameson

● There was one thing in Greece the Gestapo could not conquer—one legacy of ancient days that took them, one by one—

Illustrated by Kolliker

When man bites dog, they say, that's news. It's news, too, when a waiter tips his customer. I saw that done not long ago—quite surreptitiously to be sure—in the dining room of the Hotel Angleterre in Athens. To say that I was amazed would be to put it mildly, for I knew both men and the thing was impossible. It was not that Herr Scheer took the gold—for gold it was, strangely enough—but that Mike Pappadopoulos should have offered it. I would have thought that Mike would let himself be torn apart by wild horses before trafficking with the enemy. But there it was; I couldn't blink it. The fierce old patriot must have broken under the strain of sustained tyranny. No other explanation of the bribe was tenable. For bribe I took it to be, and wondered what extremity had driven the old Greek to the necessity of giving it.

The part played by Herr Scheer in the furtive transaction was no mystery at all. He was simply a murderous, blood-sucking leech of the type all too frequent in Europe these days. I had known him for some time as the traveling representative of an optical house in Berlin and as such had often had business dealings with him. But with the coming of the troops of the occupation forces he promptly dropped the mask and showed himself in his true colors. Anton Scheer had been the advance man of the dreaded Gestapo. It was from his long-prepared secret lists that hundreds of victims for arrest and spoilation were selected, and from those same lists that the few Hellenic Quislings were appointed to puppet administrative posts. Now that he was the resident chief of Hitler's secret operatives, his cruelty and rapacity knew no bounds. It was also common knowledge that his zeal for his beloved Fuehrer and Fatherland was not untinged by keen self-interest. In other words, Herr Scheer could be "had." Enough

money, discreetly conveyed, would unlock the tightest prison gates.

No, the sight of Scheer's curt nod and the clutching hand below the table top was no surprise to me. It was in character. My astonishment arose from the fact that old Mike had paid.

The first time I ever saw Mike was on the Acropolis one bright moonlight night about four years ago—shortly after my company had made me their Near Eastern manager with headquarters at Athens. As any American would have done, I visited the ancient rock at the first opportunity and promptly fell under the spell of the magnificent ruins atop it. Thereafter I became a frequent visitor, and soon learned that the best condition under which to view the old temples was when the moon was up. On such nights the shattered colonnades of the Parthenon stand forth in all their noble grandeur, the chips and scars mercifully softened by the silvery light. And it was on such a night that Mike first spoke to me.

I was prowling about in the ruined temple of Athena when I came upon him. He was standing rigid, as if in a trance, gazing fixedly upward into nothingness. It was in the naos, or inner sanctum, and where he stood was before the spot where tradition had it Phidias' superb ivory and gold figure of the goddess once sat enthroned. By the mild light of the moon I could see that there were several baskets on the pavement at his feet and they seemed to be filled with olives. There was a tray, too, in which were folded cloths of what I took to be embroideries. I paused and looked at him a moment, but in his rapt state he did not notice me. I was but a few feet from him, but not wishing to disturb him, I passed on.

After a brief stroll through the remainder of the interior, I went outside and climbed onto a segment of a fallen column. There I sat for a while, drinking in the splendor of the night and marveling at the perfection of the lines of everything about me. I must have fallen into a deep reverie which lasted longer than I was aware, for when I was aroused again the entire aspect of the ruins had changed, owing to the shifting shadows of the moonlight. I started, then observed that the man I had seen inside the temple was standing beside me and his baskets sitting on the ground nearby.

"You are not one of us," he was saying, and I suddenly knew that it was his voice that had awakened me from my vivid waking dream, "yet you seem to see—the power, the sublimity and the glory of it all—"

"Who could fail?" I asked, looking back at the noble facade, broken though it was.

The simplicity and purity of its lines should have moved the crudest savage. And yet I was startled to realize that I had not been thinking in terms of aesthetic values at all, but dreaming of quite other things. I had been dreaming of a long past time when the rocky summit was dazzlingly crowned with snowy white new marble structures and thronged with gayly dressed people and armored warriors. It is true that in the picture I saw the delicately carved and unbroken cornices and the rich friezes and pediments studded with perfect statuary set off by backgrounds of magnificent reds, deep blues and gold. But it was on the people that I was intent. I saw wealthy aristocrats march by with slaves bearing heaped-up platters in their train. Those fruits of the field I knew were being brought as offerings to their divine patroness and protector. Eager young men in bright armor were there, too, swarming into the temple for blessings and inspiration to victory in the campaign they were about to begin. Then, so real was my illusion, I was about to follow them into the sacred edifice to see what ritual the priests of Athena followed, when the words of the enigmatic Greek broke the train of my reverie.

"She, Pallas," he said, with his strange dark eyes fastened upon me as if he read my every thought, "is the kindest and wisest of them all. Under her strong aegis none can hurt us. It was against that shield that Xerxes and his Persian hordes beat in vain. She is, and always will be, the guardian of this city and all the cities of Hellas."

"Is?" I said, cynically. The thought that just flitted through my mind that, whatever Athena's power may have been once, it had long since gone. Since the repulse of the Persians, Greece had been overrun many times—first by the Romans, then the plundering Goths, and finally the Turks. It was centuries before the last of them was dislodged.

"Yes, *is*," he said fiercely. "She sleeps, it is true, but her power is not gone. You yourself shall see it. I promise you."

"You are a pagan?" I asked. An hour earlier I would have thought that too fantastic a question to put to anyone in these modern times, but it did not ruffle him.

"I am," he said simply.

I looked away from him and at the ruined temple standing in the mellow light of the moon. A queer duck, I thought, perhaps a little cracked. Then I turned to ask him another question. Were the baskets he had with him filled with his own offerings? His delusion might be that complete. But when I looked at where he had been he was not there. Nor were his baskets. He was gone. And the hour being late. I slid from the stone and made my way to the grand stairway that led to the sleeping city below.

The next day a cable sent me to Smyrna and thence to Stamboul. I was gone for weeks and when I came back to Athens a full moon again

rode in the sky. That night I revisited the Parthenon and again saw the mysterious man with his baskets of olives and fruits, but he ignored my presence. Again he took them into the naos and, as before, brought them out again. That, I argued, was an unusual procedure if the contents of the baskets were meant as offerings.

A day or so later I had a partial answer to that. While strolling through a crowded market street, I came upon a booth presided over by the man of the Parthenon. On its counters various products of the country were offered for sale. The embroidery and lace displayed were exceptionally fine and I bought several pieces of it. He took the money without a word or flicker of recognition.

For a few minutes I stood hesitant, then walked away with a peculiar crawly feeling of the skin. There was something distinctly uncanny about the market stall and the queer man who tended it. Though the choicest fruits and the finest needlework of the street were for sale there, few persons stopped to look and fewer still to buy. I watched them pass with expressionless faces and unseeing eyes, as if they did not see the place. Two priests came striding down the street, and, when they approached the stall, they plucked up the edges of their habits and walked softly by with averted faces as if fearful of contamination.

The peddler himself—the man of the Parthenon—had something about him that was singularly disturbing to the peace of mind. I cannot say what that was unless it was the impression he gave of utter and infinite age. Or, perhaps, agelessness. Absurd as the statement may seem, I would not venture to guess his age within a century or so—or a millennium or so for that matter. That was odd, too, for in most of the details of his appearance he might have been a well-knit, hale man of about forty. It was the profound wisdom that one saw in his weary eyes that bespoke great age. He had the look of one who had lived for eons and had long ago tired of it.

Bewildered, I left, carrying my parcel hugged to me tightly. Down the street a little way I encountered a local man I knew and asked him about the proprietor of the market stall, but he shook his head. He did not know whom I meant. Nor did any others of the several I asked. It was not until I got to the hotel and asked the ancient concierge about him that I found one who knew the man I meant. Even he looked uneasily about before he spoke, as if it was a matter to be whispered, not to be blurted out.

"You are favored," he said, cryptically. "Not many know Mike of the Parthenon. I do not, except that he is not what he seems to be. My grandfather knew him well, but then my grandfather was a silent man. I do not know what Mike's real name is or what his story."

That was all I could draw from him. Needless to say, that little whetted my curiosity to the utmost and there were few moonlit nights after that that I failed to spend part of the night on the Acropolis. The enigmatic Mike was always to be found there, and gradually he became used to my presence and occasionally spoke. I was careful not to say or think anything that might offend him, and little by little his discourse grew less guarded and more fluent. In the end there were times when words would burst forth from him in a fervid torrent.

The talk was never about himself, but of Pallas Athena and her lovely temple, or of her subjects and their vicissitudes. Night after night I listened eagerly, inexplicably aware that I was hearing things only partially guessed by archaeologists, and that often wrongly. He told me of the earlier temple on whose site the present Parthenon had been constructed; of the labors of the multitudes of slaves in quarries and in transportation to make the later building possible. From him I learned which of the groups had been designed by Phidias and which by others, and of the perfect craftsmanship of the sculptors Agoracritus and Alcomenes. He described also the long missing sculptures pilfered or destroyed by vandals.

Whenever he touched on that theme his tone took on a vindictive bitterness of the most intense sort. The man he hated most heartily was the Venetian, Morosini, who had bombarded the Parthenon with artillery in the year 1687. That act alone would have incurred Mike's undying hatred, but Morosini compounded it with what he viewed as sacrilege. In an attempt to rob the building of one of its pediment statuary groups, he had his soldiers rig for the job of lowering the marbles. But in their clumsiness they dropped the goddess' own chariot and shattered it to bits on the pavement below. Mike hinted darkly that for that impiety Morosini had died horribly some time after.

He also spoke rancorously of the many misuses made of the building by temporary conquerors of Greece. One of the emperors, Constantine, had converted the pagan shrine into a church dedicated to St. Sophia. Later the Turks transformed it into a mosque. As a self-appointed apostle of Athena, Mike detested Christian and Moslem alike, but it was the Turkish embellishment to the Parthenon that angered him most. They had defiled its classic lines by erecting a tawdry minaret—an offense even more grave than their later use of the building as a powder magazine. He assured me that its architect, even as Morosini was to do later, had faced frightful retribution for the deed. I was left to infer that Athena, or her agent, had performed the executions.

All that and more he told me. I took it for the most part in silence. I marveled at the extent of his historical knowledge, but wondered that he

should be so wholesouledly devoted to a goddess long enough dead to have degenerated to the status of a mere myth, useful only to poets and their ilk. At times I came near to twitting him on Athena's many failures to protect her people—her vaunted protection seemed to me to have failed lamentably during the last twenty centuries. But I forbore. I had come to like the man and did not want to wound him. It was not until the blackening war clouds over the Balkans actually broke and the neo-Roman legions began hammering at the northwest border that I ventured to murmur something about the time having come for Athena to rouse herself and show her power.

"Bah!" he snorted. "For those yelping jackals? They attack only because they think the prey is sick. They do not matter. It is those who will come later that are terrible. It is with those she will deal."

The situation worsened fast and soon my business troubles prevented me from spending much time outside my office. Roumania was betrayed, and Bulgaria. The Nazis were overrunning Serbia. Then came the day when the panzer armies rolled into Greece. They were not stopped on the slopes of Mike's revered Olympus, nor yet at the historic pass of Thermopylae. I thought of the queer pagan and wondered whether even the thunderbolts of mighty Zeus himself could prevail, even if faith could reanimate him. No, Zeus, Athena—all the old gods—they might still live in a few solitary hearts, but they had lost their potency.

Athens fell. The Nazi juggernaut crushed it, then rolled on to other conquests. They left behind them regiments of black-shirted scavengers to pick the bones. They left, too, their own minions—such as Herr Scheer and his storm troopers—to do their own peculiarly discreditable work. All of that was bad, but the crowning insult came when the invaders flaunted their arrogant banner of the hooked cross above Mike's beloved Parthenon. The Acropolis was closed to all civilians; moreover, the hungry harpies denuded the market of all its edibles and any other thing of value. Mike's shop was looted and wrecked. His temple was defiled. Mike's occupation was gone.

It must have been a month after that before I saw him again. That was when he appeared as a waiter in the dining room at the hotel, and I learned that he went by the name of Pappadopoulos. He chose to ignore me, but I watched him with interest, since I knew the implacable hatred in his heart toward all the fat and greedy exploiters he served. Yet he went about his work with all the unctuous suavity of his adopted calling, and the serene composure of his bearing was almost incredible. I could not help but admire the man. There are few who can bear themselves well when their most precious bubble bursts—when their dearest vision proves to be but a barren mirage. That, I knew, had happened to Mike. Greece groaned miserably under the heel of a new oppressor, yet the long-ago gods lay inert in their graves. It was pathetic.

And then that monstrous thing happened. One night he leaned over Herr Scheer's shoulder and whispered something. Then the rest, as I have related—Scheer's cold acknowledgment, the passage of the bribe. It was astounding.

I pretended not to see. I turned away and busied myself with the food on my plate. But before I did I saw that at least one other than me had also seen. That one was a Major Ciccotto, an officer of the local garrison whose power far exceeded the nominal rank he held. It was Ciccotto who had earned eternal infamy by his ruthless seizures of food. His raiding of the people's granaries had turned Greece into a land of gaunt, fear-ridden, starving people. At that moment it is hard to say which I loathed most—the cruel Scheer, or the rapacious Italian. But he had seen. The greedy glitter in his piggish eyes was the confirmation of that. I arose and left the room, overwhelmed with disgust.

A few hours after that I encountered Mike in an upper corridor of the hotel. He was carrying a tray of empty dishes and I stopped him.

"You had better be more careful," I warned. "I saw gold pass tonight. Others may have seen, too. With all these harpies about, you know—"

"I hope so," he said, with a queer, grim smile. If he had been a man less intense, I am sure it would have been a grin. And with that astonishing reply he pushed past me and went on down the hall.

I fairly gasped, for to openly display real money in the Angleterre's dining room was comparable to exposing a crippled lamb to the sight of a pack of hungry wolves. Except for me, every man present was a predatory agent of one or the other of the Axis powers. I shuddered for Mike's personal safety.

My misgivings were amply justified the very next day. Mike was absent from his usual station in the dining room. So was Scheer. But the next day Mike showed up, looking considerably the worse for wear. His lips were badly swollen and cut, one eye blackened, and there were other signs of having been severely manhandled. But he waited on his customers with his usual outward serenity. It was beyond my understanding. I took a furtive look at the nearby table where Ciccotto sat. He was watching Mike eagerly, and presently I saw him beckon him to his table.

Mike went as meekly, I thought, as a lamb to the slaughter. In obedience to the major's imperative gesture, Mike stooped to listen. There was a moment of urgent whispering, then Mike

nodded and went away. He came back in a few minutes, made a pretense of brushing crumbs from the table, and I saw his hand slip into his pocket and out again. Again a few gleaming gold coins changed hands! It was utterly baffling. I tried not to think of it any more.

Business took me away from Athens for several days and when I came back I had to go consult with my firm's banker. Jimmy Duquesne was his name; he was an old friend and one who could be counted on for an unlimited amount of off-the-record gossip. When we had finished our commercial transactions he led me to a back room where we sat down over cups of coffee.

"These totalitarians," he sighed, wagging his head, "what a nose for loot they have! It's incredible. You know how scarce gold is—has been for years—in Europe. Well, I'm swamped with it."

I lifted my eyebrows. What he had just said was strangely interesting. But I made no comment.

"Three days ago," he went on, "that unspeakable butcher Scheer came in. He had two bagfuls of it, all he could carry. He cleaned me out of paper marks and drachmae. Naturally, I had to give him literally bales of the worthless stuff in exchange. Then yesterday in walks that skunk Ciccotto with another lot of it. I could not possibly pay him off with what I had in the vaults, but, luckily, he was content with a draft on our Milan branch for the required number of lira. Now where do you suppose they found the stuff?"

"I wouldn't know," I answered, quite truthfully, though I could guess where a *little* of it came from. "Was it in bullion or coin?"

"Coin," he exclaimed, "and what coin! Much of it must be museum pieces worth I don't know how much. There was everything from a Roman *aureus* to modern Turkish pounds—medieval ducats, crowns, guilder—I don't know the name of half of them. I bought solely on the basis of weight."

He broke off and flicked the ash from his cigar with a worried look.

"Well?" I knew there was bound to be a sequel. No bank under the fiscal control of Nazidom could have a hundred-weight of metallic gold in its vaults without repercussions.

"All day today," he said dismally, "I have been overrun by secret agents—Gestapo and Ovra men. They want to know all about the gold. Where it came from, who brought it, what they said, what I paid—everything. The inner circles, it appears, are running wild."

"They would," I said grimly. "They want their share."

"Perhaps," he said, thoughtfully. "But there is more to it than that. You see, both Scheer and Ciccotto have disappeared. Without a trace!"

Things happened fast after that. Big planes dropped down daily, bearing fresh inquisitors from Belgrade, Bucharest, Vienna, even from Berlin. New contingents of Gestapo men, high-ranking army officers, and other mysterious persons swarmed out of them and descended upon the bank demanding information. Others of their stamp kept coming from Italy, also bent on the combined purpose of plunder and finding their missing predecessors. For each batch of operatives who had come before had disappeared shortly after their arrival. It was eerie. All Athens held its breath.

There were no clues, no bodies found, nothing. Men came simply to disappear. Others trailed them to find out why, only to disappear themselves. Savage reprisals were taken. Greeks were rounded up by the thousands and herded into prisons and camps, charged with being Communists, Jews or traitors. A tight curfew was imposed and severer food restrictions made on an already starved people. Yet the disappearances went on. Hundreds of Himmler's men vanished like so many extinguished candle flames. The Italian garrisons were denuded of their officers. Athens was an unhealthy place for invaders, apparently. The Germans wanted to know why, but no one broke. The conquerors were up against a blank wall.

"I wonder how long Adolf and Benito can stand the strain?" remarked Duquesne one day. "According to my computations half a thousand of their smartest and most unscrupulous gumshoe men have faded from the picture. It is a deep well that has no bottom."

Evidently the Powers That Be came to the same conclusion. An abrupt change of policy toward Greece took place. The curfew and food restrictions were lifted and the jails emptied. A benevolent old Italian general was sent to be governor and the severity of the occupation was relaxed in many ways. Gestapo men and Ovra agents were still to be seen, but the grapevine had it that those few had strict orders to forget about their missing predecessors, *and* also to forget all about gold, whether for personal account or for the coffers of "the party."

Oddly, the wave of disappearances promptly ceased.

Mike of the Parthenon coughed discreetly and I looked up. He was standing by my side in his usual obsequious way and with a napkin folded across his arm.

"They have hauled the swastika down and opened the Acropolis again," he said, and there was a gleam of exultation in his eyes, "did you know? You see, the shield of Athena still protects."

"So it appears," I said. Then I recalled that there was to be a moon that night. "Shall I meet

you in the Parthenon later?"

"No," he said. "At another place. You almost came to believe. Then you scoffed. I want to show you with your own eyes. Meet me at the end of the street in an hour."

I found him at the place appointed. He was half-hidden behind a low stone wall. Nearby was tethered a pair of donkeys. We mounted those and rode off. In a little while we were following a twisty hill trail skirting the shoulders of Mount Lycabettus. The country grew more rugged as we progressed, until at last we came to a low cliff that blocked our way. There we dismounted and he led me through the brush and along a path I would never have found by myself. We had not gone a great way when we turned abruptly into a clump of shrubbery hugging the cliffside. He drew back an armful of the tangled branches and uncovered a dark and gaping hole.

"Crawl in," he said.

I hesitated. It was a small hole, hardly thirty inches high by about as wide. Many persons had already disappeared—non-Greeks all—and here I was alone with a man who many would have thought demented. But my curiosity overcame my fears. I dropped to all fours and crawled into the black cave. I could hear him scuffling along behind me, and once or twice he warned me to watch out for my head where the ceiling was low or where we were about to make a turn.

After a dozen yards of such progress, the winding passage widened and I could no longer feel the brush of the rocky roof against my back hair.

"You can stand up now," he said, and flashed on a torch.

The place we were in appeared to be a sort of antechamber to the cave. Tortuous passages ran off from it in all directions, each floored with soft white sand. He beckoned me to follow and preceded me down one of them. It ended blind, but just before it ended I came upon a shallow hole dug out of the sand. A few gold coins of antique vintage lay scattered around it.

"That is where Scheer got his first gold. He made me show him where it was."

Then he wheeled and led me past several other wing passages. He flashed a light down one.

"Same story here—Ciccotto's gold find. He threatened to have me shot unless I told him."

He hurried on. In another divergent tunnel he showed me four leather bags neatly packed with gold coins. They were sitting on the sand and a short spade beside them. Footprints led away toward deeper recesses.

"They came back looking for more," he explained. "I think they went farther into the cave to scout out other deposits." He said it with a ghastly chuckle that chilled the soul.

"And got lost?" I asked. Some caves are like that. I pictured rotting corpses and whitening bones deeper within the labyrinth.

"Lost!" he cackled. "Yes. They are lost. Lost forever."

"I am a poor guesser," I said, sitting down on the sand and looking straight at him. "If your purpose in bringing me here was to explain something, explain it."

"I brought you to convince you," he said, with immense dignity, "that the shield of Athena still protects. These baubles"—and he indicated the packed bags of gold with a contemptuous gesture of the hand—"are only bait. The gods have always been wise enough to know that the only kind of men whom they need fear are the greedy ones. And it is by their own greed that the gods slay them. Shortly I will show you what happened to the German Scheer and the Italian and all the others who followed them.

"It was an easy matter to lure them here. I had only to pretend to be in distress—I told them I had an aged aunt in prison charged with harboring a wounded British soldier. I offered money for a favorable consideration of her case. Scheer said it would take much money. I gave him gold. He wanted more. They took me to the police station and submitted me to much abuse. At length I agreed to show him where I got my money. It was from an old temple treasure, I told him, buried in a cave. I showed him the way in and the way back. He left that first night because he had all he could carry. I knew he would go back for more. I knew, too, that he would not be content with merely what I had shown him. He would search the whole cave. The Italian Ciccotto behaved exactly in the same way. It was very simple."

"But of so many," I asked, "why did not some come back?"

"The legacy of Athena, of which I am the earthly executor, has extraordinary properties. There are vast fortunes buried in these caves—things so valuable that once men look upon them they cannot leave. Come!"

Mike led me into a transverse passage for a long way. As we proceeded it was unnecessary for him to use his electric light, for the cavern was bathed in a soft and mysterious luminosity of a faintly rose hue. He turned into a doorway on the right.

"This room is no longer used," he said.

I looked in. It was a huge semicircular room much along the lines of a Grecian theater. Directly opposite the door was an empty raised stage or dais. Between it and the doorway the amphitheater sloped upward. But the room was not empty. It was crammed with statuary.

"Examine them," Mike directed.

You have seen habitat groups in museums? It was something like that, except that the figures here were of mixed nationalities—all ancient.

There were hooded Egyptians, and many Romans—some togaed, others incased in armor. The figures were of stone, cleverly and perfectly carved, but were dressed in the habiliments of living men of the era. The figures must have stood where they were for many centuries, for many were nude with only the moldy fragments of their former clothing lying at their feet. Much of the armor was encrusted with rust and scale, though here and there a golden casque bespoke an aristocrat. The faces all had one thing in common: the features were frightfully distorted as if in an ecstasy of horror.

"Come," he said. "I will show you another room—more modern."

It was a duplication of the first, except the type of statue had changed. Here stood big-muscled, athletic figures of men, all beautifully executed in white marble. Over their shoulders heavy animal skins were flung, and there were other skins wrapped about their middles. There were many Turks there, too, and soldiers of a type I took to be Janizaries. As before, the stony faces registered utter terror. Many of the figures had their arms thrown halfway up, as if the sculptor had caught them in the act of warding off some fiendish thing that threatened them.

Mike led me through the throng of statuary much as one would tread a sidewalk mob when the persons in it are intent on studying a bulletin pasted on a wall. For it was noteworthy that all the figures had their faces turned the same way and their stony eyes fixed on a spot in midair some yards above the empty dais. He stopped at one and tapped it on the shoulder.

"This one was Morosini," he said, with cold venom, "the chief ravager of her shrine. But we must go. There is one other room to see."

I was brimming with questions, for nothing shown me yet had shed much light on the mystery of the recent disappearances. Where had the gold come from—especially the modern coins? Who had executed the vast assemblage of life-sized figures, and why were they entombed in this hidden and unknown spot? Were any of the more recently missing Gestapo men still alive?

"The modern gold," he said promptly, as if I had asked the questions out loud, "is the tribute of the faithful. I and those before me have long sold the offerings of the peasants who still have faith—you saw my market booth. Its profits are buried here. The other questions will answer themselves soon."

He lapsed into silence and took me back in the direction whence we had come. Presently we came to the passage by which we had entered and he turned deeper into the cave. I saw that loose gold was scattered along the path, a tempting lead to go farther. Suddenly Mike stopped before an open door.

"The other rooms were abandoned long ago," he said. "They became too full. It is in this one that Athena presides during the intervals when she is awake. Her sleeping compartment is in the rear, but that is forbidden to mortal man. Here, put on these."

He handed me a pair of peculiar-looking binoculars, and I noticed he had a similar pair for himself. They were a sort of cross between prismatic binoculars and spectacles, for the lenses were blanked off and there were hangers to hook over the ears. I found when I put them on that I could see perfectly well, but the images came to me through artificially widened eye-spacing, giving me a keener perception of depth. They were quite as satisfactory as straight vision, but I could not help wondering why he insisted on my wearing them.

"Now," he directed, "take my hand and walk backward."

We backed into the remaining hall. We had gone only several strides until I stopped with a gasp. I had passed and was now facing a portrait statue of a German Gestapo man I knew! The marble figure stood rigidly with the contorted expression of stark horror on his chiseled features I had seen elsewhere. His clothing was modern to the minute. I had seen the man and in those very clothes not three weeks before. It was a figure of one of the missing men, dressed in that man's clothes!

We went on. I passed a replica of an Italian major, more Gestapo replicas. At length Mike jerked me to a halt.

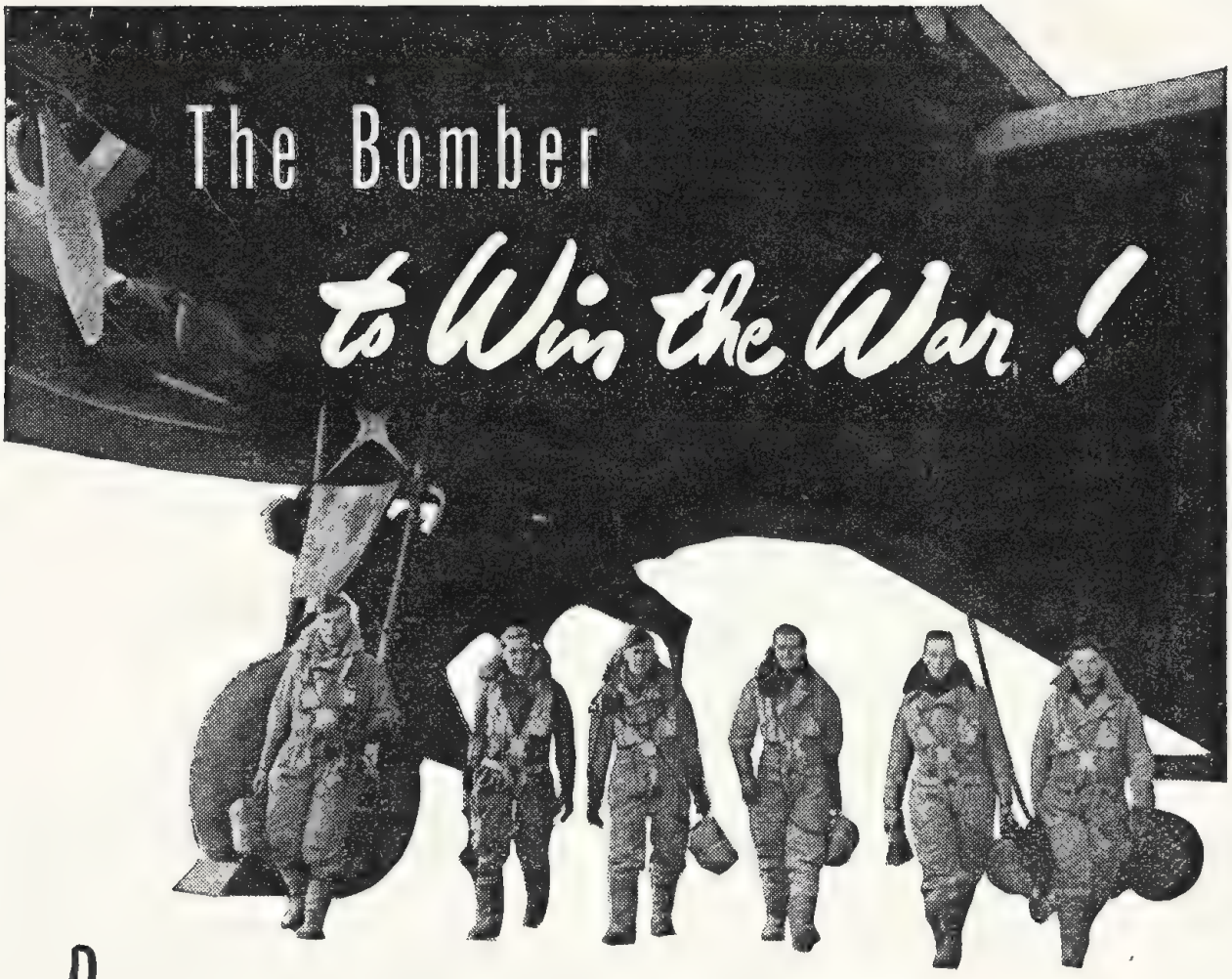
"Here is Scheer," he said. It was. Except for the fact he was in marble and not in the flesh and that his horrified expression differed from the one of smug arrogance I had been accustomed to, there was no whit of difference.

"Now," said Mike, "turn around."

I turned. The dais before me was not empty as the others had been. Upon it was a colossal throne-chair—at least twenty feet in height. Over the back of it a cloak of cloth-of-gold was thrown and atop it perched a huge, solemnly blinking owl and beside him a snow-white cock. A slender silver lance of some fifty feet in length leaned against the chair, a coiled serpent lay on the step before it. On the right side of the chair an immense golden shield stood. It was adorned with intricate carvings and I started to take off the glasses I wore in order to study its detail better.

"Don't, you fool!" said Mike, harshly, gripping my wrist with fingers of steel. "Do you want to be like the others? That is the aegis—the shield of Pallas. You cannot bear the naked sight of it—use your mirrors, man!"

I did not quite understand, and then, as I looked again, I did.



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In the midst of the shield, where another shield would have a boss, there was a head. My blood chilled at the sight of it and I felt goose flesh pop out all over me. My hair lifted and I knew that my face was as twisted in the same horrified contortions as those of the cold figures all about. For the face of the head on the shield was indescribably hideous—horrid fangs protruded from a misshapen and lipless mouth—wild eyes filled with living hatred and immeasurable fury glared out from beneath frightening eyebrows—and all about the vile face the writhing hair of the head twisted and untwisted. It was not hair, but a mass of hissing snakes.

I wanted to scream, to faint, to die. The sight was intolerable—no man could bear it. A blessed blackness blotted out my vision. I realized I had gone blind, but I was grateful for it. That did not matter, for I had clutched at myself and found reassurance—my flesh was still warm and yielding —*I* had not been turned to stone. For at that moment I knew what it was that I had gazed upon, and how I had been saved. It was by looking through the prismatic mirrors, even as Perseus had when he severed that frightful head from its former body. I had forgotten until then that he had gratefully presented the bloody, writhing trophy to his patroness and that she had set it in her shield.

"Medusa," I murmured, half hysterically, "the Gorgon, Medusa."

"Yes," said Mike of the Parthenon, grabbing me firmly by the arm and leading me way, "it still has power. Her aegis is impregnable—"

I heard no more. Even the memory of that hideous sight was unbearable.

THE END.

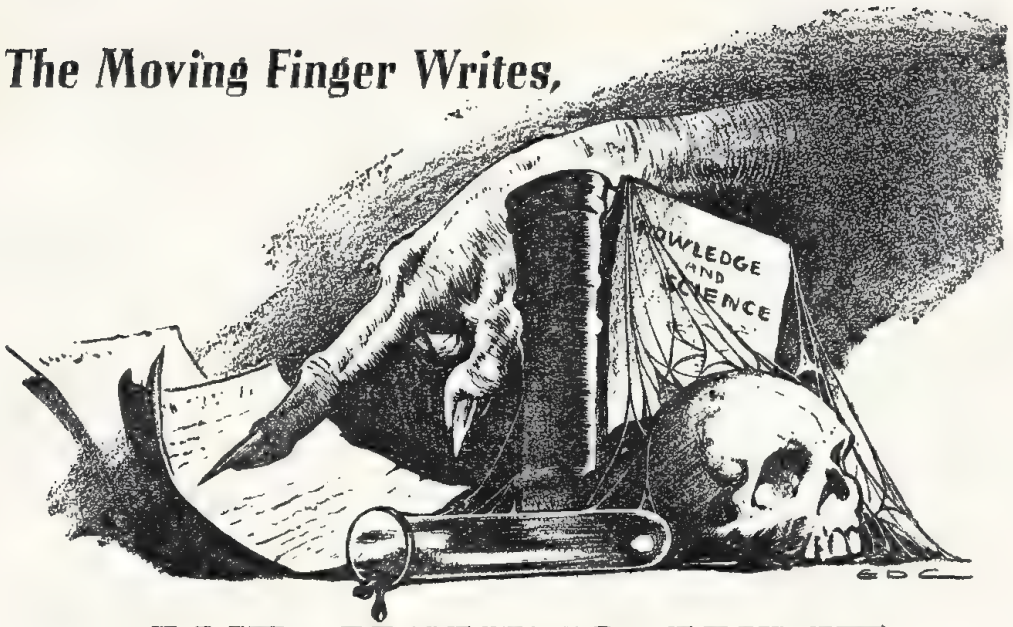
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CONTEMPLATION

By Marvin Miller

If I could know death is the end—
That there is nothing after
Except the blank of space to lend
An echo to my laughter—
If I were sure that I could gain
Oblivion forever,
Never feeling joy or pain,
And dream of living—never,
Then gladly would I thrust his blade,
And fall upon the wound it made.

The Moving Finger Writes,



---AND HAVING WRIT---

Maybe Nostradamus was talking about an English prime minister of 2491?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

This is one of those letters that you put off indefinitely and finally write. First let me say that the fantasy in Unknown is largely excellent. Fantasy fiction is a weakness of mine, but I like good fantasy. The type of yarn that de Camp writes hits the bull's-eye with me. Confidentially, just between you and me, is there really a de Camp, or is it a pseudonym for Campbell? Another thing I'd like to know, how come Boucher uses references to ideas used in de Camp's stories? Great day—is Campbell also Boucher, as well as de Camp?

I was somewhat disappointed to find no editor's page, as well as no correspondence, in the latest Unknown. How come?

Let me insert a boost for Fritz Leiber. His stories are always good. Ditto Hubbard.

One of the best short stories I remember reading was Kuttner's "Threshold" some few issues back.

I'm saving the Unknown for last October, with the article about Nostradamus in it. I snake it out from time to time and see if it checks with the later news. It prophesied a debacle for the prime minister of England, and I see in the papers that Churchill is under a little fire and wondered if the promised crash was imminent.

To return to discussing the magazine. I would like to give a rousing cheer for Cartier. Mister, that guy really can draw, and draw right. Now I know that these other artists have to make a living, and I don't like to knock them, but Cartier has just the touch for the type of illustrations for fantasy. The illustrations of a story have a great bearing on the reader's enjoyment. While perusing a yarn a frequent glance at Cartier's work certainly puts the frosting on the cake. How he does it, I don't profess to know, but he certainly has what it takes.

Incidentally, I recently read that book reviewed in the latest Unknown; the one with the preface by Phil Stong. I didn't think his selection of stories was so hot, but after all, his opinion isn't necessarily mine. His choice of a Lovecraft yarn was particularly poor, though, and I think many will agree with me there.

Well, there you have it, Mr. Campbell, one man's opinion of the magazine, also other items. The average reader knows nothing of the business of getting out a magazine—I'm in that category—and what limitations the editor has to work under are a sealed book to him. Anyway, whatever the circumstances, Unknown is a fine piece of work, stories, illustrations and all. By the way, the cover is positively genius; no flamboyant and glaring scenes there to make the magazine look cheap. So congratulations on a job well done and consider this a handshake by mail.—Robert J. Black, 965 Main Street, Hanson, Massachusetts

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We make mistakes just as slick as anybody else—and we forgot to make sure the census of stories checked the contents page.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I have been reading your magazine for over a year. And I am sore at you for not making it a

monthly. I wouldn't care if you used rags to print it, but make it a monthly. I know you don't have to ask why. But there I am, fretting through two months until the next issue, and I sit down relaxed for about two hours, and then whammo!—I start frettin' all over again. It ain't fair, I tell you.

I liked the story, "Prelude to Armageddon," very much. And "The Compleat Werewolf" was a corker. And what the heck did the "Census Taker" do in this issue? Don't tell me it's a novelty springing stories on us that aren't in the table of contents. It wasn't so bad.

Personally, I think Mr. Lyon Sprague de Camp is a bit long-winded. But interesting, nevertheless. And Edd Cartier is the only guy that could make the characters look as if they came from some place else.

Your editorial was a beautiful hunk of masterpiece. In fact, it was good.

Well, I better quit before I change places with de Camp. I'll betcha I'm not the only voice in the wilderness wailing, "Please make Unknown Worlds a monthly."—Walter Bornack, 706 Tinton Avenue, New York City

---

That hatred hasn't been "long sleeping"—it just took a cat nap.

Dear Ed:

Since everyone, regardless of their qualifications, seems to have something to say about Nostradamus, I see no reason why I can't join in the scramble.

In the June issue, Mr. Boucher modestly says, "I never said a mumbling word about Russia." I am of the opinion that he said a great deal about Russia, though he misinterpreted it at the time.

In rereading the October issue, I find this translation by Mr. Boucher:

"Two pretended friends will ccme to join together,
To awaken a long-sleeping hatred."

Like all Nostradamus, this could be interpreted more than one way, but it looks nice.

I think your magazine is the most interesting on the market. I like your lighter tales best. "A Gnome There Was," "Design for Dreaming," and "The Compleat Werewolf," have been the best recent ones, and of course, de Camp is always good. —George Mather

---

If you want back issues of Unknown Worlds, write us, and if we can't supply you, we may be able to tell you where to get them.

Dear Sir Campbell:

Ye knight of ye round table of editing hast again put the skids under all my Scotch inclinations toward thrifty hoarding. How the heck can I save my two bits with such fascinating and irresistible words as Armageddon and werewolf beckoning under that gray veil of Unknown? Even the covers are now seemingly a continuance of greens to remind us that there are with us yet some green pastures through which we escapists may happily wander!

To that satisfied sigh of complaint let me add that the last few hours I have spent in said pastures were the most agreeably digestible of many of the long-betweenish bimonthly nibbles. The Princess in the last issue was delectable, but something like a soap bubble, for after the enjoyable rainbowic display, she went *pf-ftt* and I can't conjure up any image of her or much about the plot to think over. I fear I'm something of a bovine—I like to eat my grass fast, then be able to bring it out as memory cud to be culled over and really enjoyed. I almost suspected her of being of Ozish descent—there was striking resemblance.

"Prelude to Armageddon" fitted my taste perfectly; the best since "Darker Than You Think" and "But Without Horns." Before that it must have been "None But Lucifer," which I missed and haven't managed to run down yet. After reading the "Prelude," I'm inclined to turn FBI and ask Mr. Cartmill just where he was last Black Mass night; he must have been *there;* such propaganda for Satan! He certainly believes there's two sides to every story, and do I ever agree! There's a gigantic balance somewhere, matching off good with evil, pain with joy, heat with cold, et cetera—did I say balance? It should have been magnetic field, should it not? Some day we'll know!

"The Compleat Werewolf" was clever fare; "Pobby" inexplicable, but that's how we like 'em; more to "Jesus Shoes" than meets the eye. That kind of faith does get results, and yet you just can't see the faithful dumb inheriting the earth. Puzzlement? As for the "Room," thanks for that sweet bite for dessert; it topped things off to perfection; became a room to me, even if the door was only in mind!

Now just a plug for my favorite authors, and may their tribe increase! J. Williamson, C. L. Moore, de Camp and the master humorist who wrote "The Enchanted Weekend" some time ago. Also, in suggestion—why don't you start a petition to send to A. Merritt a sort of compulsory hint that he finish those three fantasy yarns he has in keeping. With all the people who would sign it—if you could sign up the yarns for publication—betcha you would go monthly on the boost, I betcha!

In conclusion, I would also suggest that the army forces of U. S, A. draft Unknown! Firmly ensconced behind copies of said, I have definite proof that that sneaky Japanese Sandman would sneakily sneak off whipped before he even got started. Idea!—Marijane Wingo, San Diego, California

COMPLIMENTS OF THE AUTHOR

● The book gave all the answers. The being who wrote it had reduced all human affairs to a few situations, figured the answer to every one of them. But there was one human situation the owner of the book had forgotten—

Illustrated by Orban

By Henry Kuttner

"If you know what's good for you," said the cat, "you'll get the hell out of here. But quick!"

Sam Tarbell thoughtfully patted the bottle in his topcoat pocket. The gesture was only a momentary confession of weakness, for the *Journal* reporter wasn't drunk. He had several vices, including a profitable side line of blackmail; but dipsomania wasn't one of them. No, there was a simpler explanation—ventriloquism.

Tarbell's gaze went past the

cat to where Baldwin Gwinn's house loomed darkly above him, a big, ramshackle place in an isolated section of Laurel Canyon. There were no cars in the driveway. Good. Tarbell didn't want witnesses during his impending interview with Gwinn— Gwinn would pay off, of course. The evidence against the man was overwhelming. And, since Tarbell was the only one who possessed that evidence in its entirety, an attempt to collect hush money was clearly indicated.

The principle was nothing new, either in Hollywood or to Sam Tarbell. He was a lank, dark, saturnine man of forty-odd, with a permanent sneer of cynicism on his aquiline face, and a profound trust in his own ability to come out on top. Till tonight, however, he had not had occasion to cross swords with a magician. But that didn't matter—Gwinn had made a mistake, and the result should mean cash in the bank for Tarbell. He could always use money. A succession of very interesting blondes, to which he was partial, the Santa Anita track, the casinos along the Sunset Strip, and zombies, minks and melodious howlings—the Hollywood equivalent of wine, women and song—combined to keep the bank account overdrawn. But Tarbell had excellent connections, and was always willing to suppress a scandal, C. O. D. He never put the squeeze on widows or orphans, either. They seldom had money.

Now in one pocket he had a bottle of whiskey, in another certain significant photostats, and in a third a useful little automatic, very handy for bluffing his way out of tight spots. It was night. Gwinn's house was in a pocket of the Hollywood Hills, isolated, though a few lights gleamed from distant slopes. Stars and a spotlight of a moon were garish overhead. The reporter's sleek dark coupé was parked unobtrusively under a pepper tree, and a fat black cat with white mittens of paws sat on the curbstone twitching its whiskers at Sam Tarbell.

"Ventriloquism, Mr. Gwinn," said the reporter gently, "is O. K. for the sticks. But don't waste it on me."

"Ventriloquism, hell," the cat replied, glaring balefully. "Don't you know a familiar when you see one? Baldy knows you're coming, and he's all upset. I'd hate to lose him. He's a fine master. I warn you, louse, that if you hurt Baldy, I, personally, will take steps."

Tarbell aimed a kick at the cat, which was deftly avoided. The creature cursed in a fervid undertone and went behind a convenient bush, from which low, searing oaths proceeded. Tarbell's cynical sneer increased in intensity. He walked up the steps and rang the bell.

"The door's open," said the cat. "You're expected."

Tarbell shrugged and obeyed. The room in which he found himself was big, comfortably furnished, and didn't look at all like the home of a practicing magician. Etchings hung on the walls. A Bokhara rug, slightly singed, was on the floor. At a big table by the window a fat man with a cast in one eye was sitting, staring down unhappily at an open book before him.

"Hello, Gwinn," the reporter said.

Gwinn sighed and looked up. "Hello, Tarbell. Sit down. Cigar?"

"No, thanks. You know me?"

Gwinn pointed to a crystal ball on a tripod in one corner. "I saw you in that. You won't believe it, of course, but I'm really a magician."

Tarbell grinned. "Sure. I believe it. So do lots of other people. Like Ina Phairson."

Gwinn didn't turn a hair. "Such things are necessary in my profession."

"Rather tough on Ina Phairson, though. And it'd look bad in the papers. In fact, it'd look awful."

"It would mean the gas chamber, or at best a long prison term. I know. Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about it."

Tarbell took out the photostats and laid them on the table. He didn't say anything. Gwinn shuffled through the documents, nodding. His thick lips pursed.

"You have all the evidence, I see. The trouble is that I can't pay blackmail. It isn't allowed."

"Blackmail's an ugly word," Tarbell said. "Let's call it a dividend. Five thousand bucks and this evidence goes up the spout. I'll raise my price tomorrow."

Gwinn said, "You don't understand. I made a pact with the devil some years ago, and there were certain terms in the contract. One of them is that I'm not allowed to pay blackmail."

"Suit yourself." Tarbell shrugged. "You can keep those photostats. I have the originals, of course. There'll be a story about you in tomorrow's *Journal*."

"No . . . no. I don't want that." Gwinn glanced worriedly at the book before him, and closed it with a snap.

Tarbell's face didn't change, but a new look came into his eyes. That small volume had the look of a diary, or an account book. It would be interesting to thumb through it. There might be names, facts, and figures, all of which would be useful and perhaps profitable.

The book had a plain cloth cover, and on the front was a small white oval against the brown. In gold script was engraved *Baldwin Gwinn*. Tarbell read the name upside down.

"I haven't all night," he said. "Give me an answer. I don't care what it is. I'll act accordingly."

Gwinn fingered his thick lower

lip. "It's no use, of course," he said under his breath. "Still—"

He threw a handful of nothing at the fireplace, and flames blazed up with blue brilliance. Then he plucked a wax figurine out of empty air and examined it thoughtfully. It was about six inches high, and was a perfect replica of Tarbell.

He threw it into the fire.

"I've heard of that," Tarbell said. "But I don't believe it."

"Then it won't work," Gwinn muttered, but waited, nevertheless. For a brief moment Tarbell felt uncomfortably warm. He didn't show it. He grinned tightly, and the feeling went away.

Then, without warning, there was a third person in the room. His name was Andy Monk, and two years ago he had died at the hands of the law, as a result of a feature story Tarbell had written. Monk wouldn't pay blackmail, either. And Tarbell had always been afraid of the man and his handiness with a knife. For months, till Monk was captured, he had gone in fear of shadows—

Monk was a shadow now, and Tarbell knew that. Hypnosis was old stuff. But the hatred blazing in the man's eyes was horribly disturbing.

Monk had a gun, and he fired it at Tarbell. The bullets weren't real, of course. Tarbell braced himself against the impact; almost to his surprise, he realized that he was trembling violently. Hypnotism—but—

Monk threw away his gun and took out a long-bladed knife. Tarbell had always been afraid of that knife. He tried to look through the phantom, but Monk was visibly, if not tangibly, real. Maybe he was tangible, after all. Bullets were one matter. Ghost bullets. A knife was another, somehow. Blue firelight rippled up the blade.

Tarbell didn't want even an intangible knife slicing at his throat. He was scared now. His heart was pounding violently. He hastily took out his automatic and said hoarsely, "Turn it off, Gwinn. Quick!"

He couldn't see Gwinn, because the room was very dark, and Monk was plunging forward, laughing, the knife driving up viciously. Tarbell chewed his lip, gave back a step, and fired. Instantly he regretted the weakness.

He regretted it even more as Monk vanished, and he saw Gwinn slumped in his chair, the top of his head blown off.

The magician's eyes were wide open, but unseeing. Tarbell stood quite motionless for several minutes, breathing hard. Then he shoved the gun back in his pocket, stepped forward, and picked up the brown book from the table. He didn't touch the body. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the doorknobs as he went out of the house, and, standing in the friendly darkness, he found the whiskey bottle in his coat and drank deeply. It helped.

"But I couldn't—" he said aloud, and broke off, with a quick glance around. Nothing stirred.

Except the cat. The cat came out of the shadows and looked at Tarbell with luminous green eyes.

"There's still revenge," it said, waving its tail. "And I'm a particularly nasty sort of familiar. I was fond of Baldy. Run along, Sam Tarbell. You won't get into any trouble with the police. But you'll get into trouble with me—and my friends. It'll be harder, since you've got the book, but I'll manage." It yawned, flicking a pink tongue at Tarbell.

The reporter thought of posthypnosis, and slowly drew his automatic. The cat went away, with the magic peculiar to cats. Tarbell nodded and descended the steps, getting into his car and starting the motor with a nervous jerk.

It was awkward turning the car around on the narrow, winding road, but he managed it without too much difficulty. Going down the canyon in second gear, Tarbell kept his eyes on the black center line and thought hard. Murder. First-degree, at that. But there was no evidence.

He chewed his lip. He was getting shaky, firing at shadows. Unfortunate that Gwinn happened to be behind that particular shadow. Still—

Still, it couldn't be helped, and the worst possible thing to do was brood about it. Much better to shove the incident to the back of his mind. Hell, in the old days in Chicago murder hadn't meant much. Why should it mean anything now?

Nevertheless, it did. Tarbell had always taken pains to keep his skirts clear of messes. By a natural trick of compensation, he had come to regard his blackmailing activities with tolerant satisfaction. In this world, the race was to the swift. A slow horse was handicapped—unless he got the needle. A man smart enough to use a hypo stimulant wasn't necessarily a rat, except according to narrow standards, which did not concern Tarbell.

If you were clever enough to get your hands on smart money, that was all to the good. And it was far, far better than living on a reporter's salary alone.

But Tarbell was shaken. "Self-defense," he said under his breath, and lit a cigarette, illegal in this fire-hazard area. He put it out immediately. It wouldn't do to be stopped by an officer.

A giant stood threateningly in the glare of the headlights, gnarled and menacing. Tarbell wrenched at the wheel in sudden panic. It was nothing but an oak; just the same, the illusion was frightening. Briefly Tarbell had seen the huge face of a hag peering at him, loose mouth writhing, eyes flaming green—

It was gone now, but the after-

taste of fear was sour in Tarbell's mouth. He turned the car into a side road and parked, staring at nothing. Not so good. He couldn't afford hysteria.

He drank whiskey, shuddered, and wiped his lips with his hand. It was trembling a little. Tarbell lay back and breathed deeply, his eyes closed. He'd be all right in a minute. The canyon road was steep and winding, and he preferred not to risk it till his hands stopped shaking.

Meantime he remembered Gwinn's diary. It lay on the seat beside him, a flat brown volume rather smaller than an 8vo, and Tarbell picked it up, switching on the overhead light.

Oddly enough, the gold script on the front said *Samuel Tarbell.*

Tarbell looked at that for a long time. He touched the white oval with an exploratory finger. It was smooth and glossy—parchment, perhaps. Finally he opened the book at random. The page number—17—in the upper right-hand corner was in large block numerals, and there was only one sentence, in crude type that seemed hand-set. It said:

"Werewolves can't climb oak trees."

Tarbell read it again. It still said the same thing. Frowning, he turned the page.

"He's bluffing."

That was all—two words. Cryptic, to say the least. Obviously, this wasn't Gwinn's diary. It was more like "Finnegan's Wake."

Tarbell flipped the pages. Page 25 said:

"Try the windshield."

Page 26 said:

"Declare the truth and fear no man." A few pages later, Tarbell found this: "Deny everything."

There were other ambiguous

comments. "Don't worry about poor crops," "Aim at his eye," "Don't speak till you're back on earth," and "Try again." As a collection of aphorisms, the book was more than a little cryptic. But Tarbell had a queer feeling that he was on the verge of a mystery—an important one, somehow. Only he couldn't find the key.

The hell with it. Gwinn was a screwball. This volume meant nothing. Or—

It was growing chilly. Tarbell, with a wry mouth, dropped the book on the seat beside him and started the engine. The one inexplicable thing was the discovery of his name on the volume's brown cover. Previously it had had Gwinn's name—or had it? Thinking back, he wasn't quite certain. At any rate, the doubt was comforting.

He backed the car, turned, and drove on down the canyon, branching into Laurel, the main thoroughfare. As usual, there was plenty of traffic, since the road was a short cut between Hollywood and the Valley.

The accident came not quite without warning. On the left of the road was a gully; on the right, an overhanging tree. The headlights picked out something definitely abnormal about that tree. For the second time Tarbell saw the gray, rugose, sagging face of a hag, toothless mouth agape in a grin, the de-

formed head nodding as though in encouragement. He was quite certain that, mingled somehow with the trunk and branches, was the monstrous figure of a woman. The tree had become anthropomorphic. It was wrenching, straining, hunching its heavy shoulders as it swayed and lurched toward the road—

It fell. Tarbell caught his breath and jammed his foot down on the accelerator, swinging the car to the left. The cold motor stuttered hesitantly, without gaining speed, and that was unfortunate. The tree crashed down, and a heavy branch seemed to thrust itself under the wheels. Tires blew out with sickening bangs. The breath-stopping sickness of imminent danger froze Tarbell into paralysis as the coupé went over the curb, toppling, skidding down, turning over and over till it came to rest on its side.

Tarbell's head rang like a bell; white flashes of pain lanced through it. He was jammed awkwardly behind the steering wheel, which, luckily, had not snapped off. He had avoided impalement, at any rate. He reached fumblingly for the key, to snap off the ignition, but a flicker of fire told him he was too late.

The car was ablaze.

Painfully Tarbell tried to right himself. The shatterproof glass had not broken, and he thrust upward against the door, now above his head. It was jammed. He could see stars through the glass, and a coiling veil of thin smoke that partly obscured them. A reddening glow grew brighter. When the fire reached the gas tank—

He heard distant shouts. Help was coming, but probably it would not come in time. With a choking cry Tarbell strained up against the door; he could not budge it. If he could break the glass—

He sought for a tool. There was none. The dashboard compartment was jammed, and, in his awkward position, he could not remove a shoe to hammer against the glass. The acrid smell grew stronger. Red light flickered.

The sharp corner of something was jammed against his side, and Tarbell, hoping it might be a loose bit of metal heavy enough to serve his purpose, clutched at it. He found himself staring at the book. The white circle on the cover was luminous, and traced darkly against the whiteness were two Arabic numerals:

25

The need for self-preservation sharpens the faculties. It was instinct that brought vividly to Tarbell the memory of what he had read on Page 25 of the book. The enigma of the message was suddenly elucidated.

"Try the windshield."

Tarbell thrust at the long plate of glass with his palm, and the windshield fell out. A breath of cool air blew in against his sweating face. The crackling of flames was very loud now.

He kept a tight grip on the book as he wormed his way through the gap, skinning his shin rather badly; and he ran down the gully, gasping for breath, till the red firelight had faded. A booming roar told him the gas tank had exploded. Tarbell sat down, feeling weak, and looked at the book. It was an oblong, darker shadow in the faint moonlight.

"My God," he said.

After a while he put the book in a pocket of his tattered topcoat and clambered out of the gully. Cars were parked along the curb, and men were moving about, using flashlights. Tarbell walked back toward the crowd.

He was conscious of irritation at the impending scene. The only thing he wanted, just now, was a chance to examine the book privately. There was a point at which skepticism stopped. Tarbell had run up against enough news *curiosa* in the past to retain a certain amount of credulity. The whole thing *might* be merely a coincidence—but he didn't think so.

There was a confusion of questioning, loud, rather pointless conversation, and assurances, on Tarbell's part, that he was unhurt. With an officer, he went to a nearby house and telephoned his insurance company. Meanwhile a taxi had been summoned.

Tarbell ordered the cabman to stop in Hollywood at a convenient bar, where he gulped several whiskey sours and fingered the book in his pocket. He didn't quite dare to examine it there, however, and, in any case, the lighting was indirect—perhaps on the questionable principle that people seldom appear at their best when they are tight. Replenished and conscious of a mounting excitement, Tarbell reached his Wilshire apartment at last, closed the door behind him, and switched on the light.

He stood motionless for a time, just looking around. Then he went to a couch, lit a reading lamp, and took the brown volume from his pocket.

The inset white disk on the front cover was blank. His own name scrawled in gilt lettering against the dull-brown cloth. He turned to Page 25. It said, "Try the windshield."

Tarbell closed the book and opened it at the flyleaf, which was blank. The next page was more interesting. In the familiar hand type, his own name leaped up at him.

Dear Mr. Tarbell:

By this time, you may already have discovered the peculiar qualities of this *grimoire*. Its powers are limited, and only ten-page references are allotted to each owner. Use them with discrimination.

Compliments of the author.

Cryptic—but significant! Tarbell looked up *grimoire*, but the word wasn't in his dictionary. It meant a book of magic, he remembered rather vaguely. A collection of spells—

Thoughtfully he flipped the book's pages again. Spells? Advice, rather. Certainly the advice about the coupé's windshield had come in very handy.

Tarbell's lips tightened in a crooked smile. One advantage of the accident: he had forgotten to be worried by the murder! Maybe that wasn't so good. If the police grew suspicious—but there was no reason why they should be. His presence in Laurel Canyon was easily explained; the boulevard was a well-traveled thoroughfare. And Gwinn's body might not be discovered for days, in that isolated section.

He stood up, stripping off the ragged overcoat and tossing it aside with a gesture of distaste. Tarbell liked clothes, with an almost sensuous feeling. He went into the bathroom to start the shower, and came back instantly, followed by the beginnings of steam clouds. He picked up the book from the couch.

It lay on a stand as he bathed and donned pajamas and a robe. It was in his hand as he slippered back into the living room, and his gaze was upon it as he mixed himself a drink. It was stiff, and, as he sipped the whiskey, Tarbell felt a warm, restful languor beginning to seep into his mind and body. Till this moment he had not realized how jangled were his nerves.

Now, leaning back, he pondered on the book. Magic? Were there such things? He thumbed through the pages again, but the printed lines had not altered in the least. Extraordinary, and quite illogical, how that message about the windshield had saved his life. The other pages—most of them bore sentences wild to the point of lunacy. "Werewolves can't climb oak trees." So what?

Tarbell fixed himself another drink. He was going somewhat beyond his capacity tonight, for fairly obvious reasons. But he didn't show it, except for a glisten of perspiration on his high, tanned forehead.

"This should develop into something interesting," a soft voice said.

It was the cat. Fat, glossy, and handsome, it sat on a chair opposite Tarbell, watching the man with enigmatic eyes. The mobile mouth and tongue of a cat, he thought, were well suited for human speech.

The cat rippled its shoulder muscles. "Do you still think this is ventriloquism?" it asked. "Or have you progressed to hallucinations?"

Tarbell stood up, walked across the room, and slowly extended his hand. "I'd like to make certain you're real," he said. "May I—"

"Gently. Don't try any tricks. My claws are sharp, and my magic's sharper."

Satisfied by the feel of the warm fur, Tarbell drew back and looked down consideringly at the creature. "All right," he said, his voice a little thick. "We've progressed this far, anyhow. I'm talking to you—admitting your existence. Fair enough."

The cat nodded. "True. I came here to congratulate you on escaping the dryad, and to tell you I'm not discouraged."

Tarbell sat down again. "Dryad, eh? I always thought dryads were pretty. Like nymphs."

"Fairy tales," the cat said succinctly. "The Grecian equivalent of yellow journalism. Satyrs only made love to young deciduous dryads, my friend. The older ones . . . well! You may be able to imagine what the dryad of a California sequoia would be like."

"I think so."

"Well, you're wrong. The older an anthropomorphic being grows, the less rigidly are the dividing lines drawn. Ever notice the sexlessness of old humans? They die, of course, before they progress further than that. Eventually the line between human and god is lost, then between human and animal, and between animal and plant. Finally there's a commingling of sentient clay— Beyond that you'd not care to go. But the sequoia dryads have gone beyond it." The cat-eyes watched, alert and inscrutable. Tarbell sensed some definite purpose behind this conversation. He waited.

"My name, by the way, is Meg," the cat said.

"Female, I presume?"

"In this incarnation. Familiars in their natural habitat are sexless. When aliens manifest themselves on earth, they're limited by terrestrial laws—to a certain extent, anyway. You may have noticed that nobody saw the dryad but you."

"There wasn't anybody else around."

"Exactly," Meg said, with an air of satisfaction.

Tarbell considered, conscious more than ever that he was dueling with the creature. "O. K.," he nodded. "Now let's get down to cases. You were Gwinn's . . . eh? . . . familiar. What does that imply?"

"I served him. A familiar, Tarbell, serves a wizard as a catalyst."

"Come again."

"Catalysis: a chemic reaction promoted by the presence of a third unaffected substance. Read magic for chemic. Take cane sugar and water, add sulphuric acid, and you get glucose and levulose. Take a pentagram and ox blood, add me, and you get a demon named Pharnegar. He's the dowser god," Meg added. "Comes in handy for locating hidden treasures, but he has his limitations."

Tarbell thought that over. It seemed logical. All through the centuries, folklore had spoken of the warlock's familiar. What purpose the creature had served was problematical. A glorified demoniac valet? Rather silly—

A catalyst was much more ac-

ceptable, somehow, especially to poor Tarbell's alcohol-distorted brain.

"It seems to me we might make a bargain," he said, staring at Meg. "You're out of a job now, aren't you? Well, I could use a little magical knowledge."

"Fat chance," the cat said scornfully. "Do you think for a minute magic can be mastered by a correspondence course? It's like any highly trained profession. You have to learn how to handle the precision tools, how to train your insight, how to— My master, Tarbell, it's something more than a university course! It takes a natural linguist, to handle the spells. And trained, whiplash responses. A perfect sense of timing. Gwinn took the course for twenty-three years before he got his goatskin. And, of course, there's the initial formality of the fee."

Tarbell grunted. "You know magic, apparently. Why can't you—"

"Because," Meg said very softly, "you killed Gwinn. I won't outlast him. And I had been looking forward to a decade or two more on Earth. In this plane, I'm free from certain painful duties that are mine elsewhere."

"Hell?"

"Anthropomorphically speaking, less. But your idea of Hell isn't mine. Which is natural, since in my normal state, my senses aren't the same as yours."

Meg jumped down from the chair and began to wander around the room. Tarbell watched it—her—closely. His hand felt for and clutched the book.

The cat said, "This will be an interesting game of wits. The book will give you considerable help—but I have my magic."

"You're determined to . . . to kill me?" Tarbell reached for his topcoat. "Why?"

"I told you. Revenge."

"Can't we bargain?"

"No," Meg said. "There's nothing you can offer me that would be any inducement. I'll stick around, and enlist a salamander or something to get rid of you."

"Suppose I put a bullet into you?" Tarbell asked, taking his automatic from the coat. He leveled it. "You're flesh and blood. Well?"

The cat sat down, eying Tarbell steadily. "Try it," Meg said—

For no sensible reason, the reporter felt curiously frightened. He lowered the gun.

"I rather wish," Meg said, "that you had tried to kill me."

"Oh, hell," Tarbell grunted, and got up, the book in his hand. "I'm going to get another drink." Struck by a thought, he paused. "For all I know, you may still be a hallucination. A drunken one. In that case—" He grinned. "May I offer you a saucer of cream, Meg?"

"Thanks," said the cat appreciatively. "I'd like it."

Tarbell, pouring the cream, grinned at his reflection in the kitchen window. "*Toujours gai*, all right," he soliloquized. "Maybe I should put rat poison in this. Oh, well."

Meg lapped the cream, keeping her eyes on Tarbell, who was dividing his attention between his drink and the book. "I wonder about this," he said. "There doesn't seem to be anything magical about it. Do messages appear—like a clairvoyant's slate?"

The cat snorted delicately. "Things don't work that way," she said. "The book's got fifty pages. Well, you'll find an answer to every conceivable human problem on one of those pages."

Tarbell frowned. "That's— ridiculous."

"Is it? History repeats itself, and humans live a life of clichés. Has it occurred to you, Tarbell, that humanity's life pattern can be boiled down to a series of equations? Fifty of them, I think. You can find the lowest common denominator, if you go far enough, but that's far beyond human understanding. As I see it, the author of that book analyzed humanity's lives, boiled them down to the basic patterns, and expressed those equations as grammatical sentences. A mere matter of semantics," Meg finished.

"I don't think I get it. Wait a minute. Maybe I do. 13ab minus b equals 13a. 13ab stands for eggs— Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."

"Muddy reasoning, but you have the idea," Meg acknowledged. "Besides, you forgot the hen."

"Incubator," Tarbell said absently, and brooded over the book. "You mean, then, that this has the answer to every known human problem What about this: 'Werewolves can't climb oak trees'? How often does anybody meet a werewolf?"

"Symbolism is involved. And personal psychological associations. The third-but-last owner of that book, by the way, was a werewolf," Meg purred. "You'd be surprised how beautifully it all fits."

"Who wrote it?" Tarbell asked.

The cat shrugged, a beautifully liquid gesture. "A mathematician, of course. I understand he developed the idea as a hobby."

"Satan?"

"Don't give yourself airs. Humans aren't important. Earth isn't important, except to provide intellectual exercise to others. Still and all, this is a simple world, with too little of the uncertainty factor."

Tarbell started to laugh. After a while he said, "I just realized I was sitting here discussing semantics with a cat."

But Meg had vanished—

Familiarity with an enemy destroys wariness, and no doubt the cat knew that well enough. Obviously Tarbell should have been on guard. The fact that

Meg had drunk his cream—the equivalent of bread and salt—meant nothing; cats are amoral, familiars, by preference, immoral. The combination was perilous.

But Tarbell, his mind slightly hazy with whiskey, clutched the book like a buckler and felt safe. He was thinking about formulas of logic. "Matter of deduction," he muttered. "I suppose the . . . author . . . made a lot of graphs and things and arrived at his conclusions that way. Tested them by induction. *Whew!*" It was a dizzying thought.

Again he examined the book. The white circle on the cover was luminous again, and there was a number visible there. Tarbell's stomach lurched.

Page 34.

He glanced around hastily, expecting anything; but the apartment seemed unchanged. Meg had not reappeared.

Page 34 said, "Canaries need oxygen."

Canaries?

Tarbell remembered. A few days ago, a friend had given him an expensive Roller canary, and he had not yet got rid of the creature. Its cage hung in a corner, covered with a white cloth. No sound proceeded from it.

Tarbell went over and pulled the cover away. The canary was in trouble. It was lying on the bottom of the cage, kicking spasmodically, beak wide open.

Oxygen?

Tarbell whistled under his breath and whirled to the windows, yanking them open one by one. The gusts of cold, fresh air made his head spin. He hadn't realized how drunk he was.

Whiskey, however, didn't account for the feeling of sick nausea in his stomach. He watched the canary slowly revive, and chewed at his lip. The air in the room hadn't been depleted enough to kill a bird. This wasn't a coal mine.

A coal mine—gas—*yeah!* Tarbell, grinning tightly, dropped to his knees beside the gas radiator. As he had expected, the cock was turned on full, and he could hear a soft hissing.

Meg didn't always depend on magic. And a cat's paws were handy little tools.

Tarbell closed the valve and made a circuit of the apartment, finding another open radiator in the bedroom. He attended to that. The canary recovered and peeped feebly. Tarbell threw the cover back over its cage and considered.

The book— The numerals on the cover had faded again. He felt a resurgence of panic. Ten references were allowed him. He had used two. That left eight—only eight. And Meg was a resourceful familiar, hell-bent on revenge.

There was a thought stirring at the back of Tarbell's mind, but it refused to emerge. He relaxed and closed his eyes. After a while the thought came out of hiding.

In his hands he held a magical power whose potentialities were unlimited. The brown book had the answer to every human problem. If Napoleon had possessed it, or Luther, or Caesar—well! Life was a succession of problems. Men were handicapped by their inability to visualize the complete equation. So they made mistakes.

But this book, Tarbell thought, told the right answer.

Ironic that its powers should be wasted. That was what the situation amounted to. Ten references were allowed; after that, Meg would get her revenge, unhindered by the book's countermagic. What a waste!

Tarbell rubbed his temples hard. A gold mine had been dumped in his lap, and he was trying to figure out a way of using it. Any time danger threatened, the book would give the solution, according to the equation of logic. Then the magic was, so to speak, passive—

Not quite. If Tarbell faced financial ruin, that would certainly come under the classification of danger. Unless the meaning embraced only the danger of bodily harm. He hoped there were no such limitations.

On that assumption, if Tarbell faced ruin, the book would give a page number that would save him. Would it simply point out a way of returning to his former financial status? No. Because that status had already been proved unsound and dangerous by the mere fact of its cancellation.

Casuistic reasoning, perhaps, but with clever manipulation, Tarbell felt confident that he could play the cards close to his chest. He wanted money. Very well. He would place himself in a position where financial ruin was imminent, and the book would come to his rescue.

He hoped.

There were only eight page references left, and it would not do to waste them in making tests. Tarbell skimmed through the book, wondering if he could apply the messages himself. It didn't seem probable. "Say no to everything," for example. In special circumstances, that was no doubt good advice. But who was to know when those circumstances would arise?

Only the book, of course.

And—"An assassin awaits.' Excellent advice! It would have been invaluable to Caesar—to most of the Caesars, in fact. Knowing that a murderer was in ambush, it would be easy to take precautions. But one couldn't be on guard all the time.

The logic was perfect, as far as it went. But one element was ever lacking—the time-variable. Since that particular variable depended entirely on the life-pattern of the book's owner, it was manifestly impossible for it to be any rational sort of a constant.

Meantime, there was Meg. Meg was murderously active, and determined on her vengeance. If Tarbell used the book—*could* use the book—to get what he wanted personally, he'd use up the eight chances left and leave himself unguarded against attack. Fame and fortune mean little to a corpse.

A red glow came from the window. A small, lizardlike creature crawled into view. There were suction pads on its toes, like a gecko's, and a faint smell of charring paint came with it as it scuttled over the sill. It looked like red-hot metal.

Tarbell looked at the book. It was unchanged. This wasn't a danger, then. But it might have been—if he hadn't turned off the gas. Introduce a blazing salamander into a gas-filled apartment, and—

Yeah.

Tarbell picked up a siphon at his elbow and squirted soda at the salamander. Clouds of steam arose. The creature hissed and fled back the way it had come.

Very well. Eight chances were still left. Eight moves in which to outwit—and destroy!—Meg. Less than that, as few as possible, in fact, if any chances were to be left. And it was necessary to leave a few, or Tarbell's status in life would remain unchanged. Merely escaping from danger wasn't enough. He wanted—

What?

He got pencil and paper and sat down to figure it out. Happiness was too vague—another variable, depending on the individual. Power? Women? Money? He had them all, in sufficient quantity. Security?

Security. That was a human constant. Security against the ominous shadows of the future. But one couldn't simply wish for security. The book didn't work that way. Abstractions were beyond its scope, seemingly.

What gave people security? Money was the first answer, yet that was not satisfactory. Tarbell tried a new tack. Who *was* secure?

Paisanos, on the whole, were more contented than potentates. However, Tarbell didn't want to be a *paisano.* What about Herrick, the publisher? Security? Well, no. Not when the world itself was unstable.

In the end Tarbell decided nothing. Perhaps the best solution was to get himself into the worst spot possible, and leave the rest to the book. And, if the book failed him—

It might do just that. But Tarbell was a gambler. What was the worst thing that could happen now?

The answer was obvious. The loss of the book!

A fire was laid ready in the grate. Tarbell touched a match to a fold of newspaper, and watched the flames creep up till the hardwood was crackling. If he purposely rendered himself helpless, the book should logically reveal a panacea—a cure-all that would eliminate all his difficulties. It was worth trying.

Tarbell grinned at his own cleverness.

He threw the book into the fire, face up. The flames licked up hungrily. Instantly two numerals appeared on the white oval.

43

The ultimate answer! The cure for the loss of the book!

Tarbell plunged in his hand and snatched the volume out of the grate, amid a scattering of embers. The brown cover was slightly singed, but the pages were unharmed. Breathing a little hoarsely, he crouched on his hams and turned to Page 43.

It said, with a certain touch of naïve malice:

"That's right."

Tarbell got up, face expressionless. He picked up his empty highball glass and smashed it against the wall. That done, he went to the window and looked out unseeingly at the night.

Seven references were left.

Tarbell slept well enough, untroubled by dreams, and with the book under his pillow. The next morning a cold shower and black coffee steadied him for the forthcoming ordeal. He had no illusions about what was going to happen. Meg had not given up.

It was late when he arrived at the *Journal.* Dusty sunlight slanted into the city room. Copy boys scuttled here and there with flimsies, and, all in all, it looked like a set for any motion picture involving newspaper life. Rewrite men were busy rewriting, and glass-paneled partitions toward the back hinted at irate editors ready to send out star reporters on perilous assignments. Tim Hatton, a cameraman, was moodily shaking dice in a corner.

"Hyia, Sam," he said around a cigarette. "Roll you a couple?"

MacGregor, a Denver man who had grown old in harness, lifted a bald head from his desk to leer at Tarbell. "Tim Hatton has been going to movies," he said hoarsely. "Tim Hatton has been reading all about Charlie MacArthur and Ben Hecht. Man and boy, I've been writing copy all over the country, and not even with Bonfils have I known a guy more determined to be a newspaperman. Pretty soon he'll be telling you about his hangover, Tarbell, and offering you a drink out of that pretty little silver flask on his hip. Ah, youth." MacGregor returned to his work and ate a lemon drop.

"Sourpuss," Hatton said, pink around the ears. "Why don't he quit riding me?"

"Go out and snap a murderer," MacGregor said. "Push right through a cordon of police—pardon, harness bulls, I mean—and go into the building where Public Enemy No. 1 is cornered. I wish motion pictures had never been invented. These so-and-so cubs who come in here, wet behind the ears, expecting to find Eddie Robinson behind the city desk."

Tarbell was glancing through a still-damp copy of the *Journal,* wondering if Gwinn's body had been found yet. He said absently, "Them days have gone forever, Tim."

"So *you* say," Hatton grunted, and peered at his wrist watch. "I've got a date with Barney Donn in half an hour. Well?"

MacGregor said in a mechanical voice, "Barney Donn, Arnie Rothstein's successor, born February 3, 1892, Chicago beer baron under Capone, served time on a Federal tax rap, biggest gambler in Florida, left Hialeah a week ago— What's he doing here?"

"That's my job to find out," Hatton said. "He's news."

Tarbell put down the paper. "I'll go along. I used to know Barney." He didn't mention that once he'd blackmailed Donn for a couple of grand, and that he was vaguely worried about the gambler's appearance in Hollywood. Had Meg anything to do with this? Donn had a long memory. It might be wise to take the bull by the horns—

MacGregor crunched a lemon drop. "Remember Rothstein," he said sardonically. Hatton cursed him casually and picked up his camera.

"Ready, Sam?"

"Yeah." Tarbell dropped the *Journal.* Nothing in it about Gwinn. He hesitated, wondering whether he should check up on the obit file, but decided not to risk it. He followed Hatton out of the office, past the reception clerk, and watched the cameraman settle a mangled hat on the back of his head. Smoke drifted lazily from Hatton's nostrils.

The office cat gave Tarbell a start, but in a moment he saw that it wasn't Meg. But the creature gave him something to think about. He began to wonder what the familiar would try next.

He was at cross-purposes with Meg. Meg had little time, but lots of magic. Tarbell had little magic, but it was to his advantage to play for time. Meg had said she wouldn't outlast Gwinn. How long *would* she last? Maybe she'd grow more and more tenuous, till she finally vanished completely.

Meanwhile, he had the book.

But he wasn't certain yet of the best way to use it. He kept it handy, just in case Barney Donn was in Meg's employ. The gambler had a reputation for squareness, but he was a decidedly tough customer.

The hotel clerk took their names and said to go right up. It was a big hotel, one of the best in Los Angeles. And Donn had taken a suite.

He greeted them at the door, a stocky, swarthy man with a broken nose and a broad toothy grin. "Jeez, Sam Tarbell," he said. "Who's the punk with you?"

"Hi, Barney. This is Tim Hatton. We're both on the *Journal.* And you can drop the

colloquialisms—we'll give you the sort of write-up you want, anyway."

Donn chuckled. "Come on in. I got in the habit of using this lingo in Chi, and I can't break myself of it. I'm a Jekyll and Hyde. Come in, will you?"

Tarbell wasn't as relieved as he might have been. As Hatton went on into the apartment, he lingered a bit behind, touching Donn's sleeve. The gambler opened wide brown eyes.

"What's up?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Vacation," Donn said. "And I want to do some gambling out here. I hear nice things about it."

"That's the only reason?"

"Yeah. I get it. You're thinking—" Donn chuckled again. "Look, Tarbell. You put the squeeze on me once, but you won't do it again. I cleaned up my record, see?"

"So have I," the reporter said ambiguously. "Matter of fact, I'm sorry I had to ask you for that dough, but—"

"Money!" Donn said, shrugging. "It ain't hard to make. If you're thinking I hold a grudge, the answer is no. Sure, I'd like to get that dough back from you—just to square accounts—but what the hell! I never killed anybody in my life."

And, with that comforting assurance, he led the way into the next room.

Two men were sitting around a table, local gambling big shots, and they were watching Hatton do card tricks. The photographer was enjoying himself immensely. His cigarette was on the verge of burning his lower lip, and he shuffled and flipped the cards with remarkable dexterity.

"See?" he said.

"How about a hand?" Donn asked Tarbell. "We haven't played for years."

Tarbell hesitated. "O. K. A hand or two. But I'm not sticking my neck out." He knew that Donn was an honest gambler, or he might have refused outright.

Liquor was on the table, and Donn poured and passed the glasses. "I played a little on the plane, but I want to make sure my luck's holding in California. I had a good streak at Hialeah— Stud, eh?"

"Ante?" Hatton was beaming.

"Five hundred."

"Uh!"

"Make it a hundred to start, then," Donn grinned. "Can do?"

Hatton nodded and took out his wallet. Tarbell did the same, flipping bills on the table and exchanging them for chips. The other two men silently drank whiskey and waited.

The first hand was mild, Donn winning the pot with a low straight, nothing wild. Hatton took the next hand, and Tarbell the third, which was satisfyingly fat with blue chips. He said, "One more, and I check out."

"Aw—" That was Hatton.

"Stay if you like," Tarbell told him. "It's a straight game, but Barney's got card sense."

"Always had," Donn said, shuffling. "Even as a kid. Stick around awhile, Sam."

Tarbell drew to a flush, and missed. Donn won. He raked in a few chips as the reporter stood up.

"That's all, Barney. Let's have the interview, and we'll push off. Or I will, if Hatton wants to stay."

"Stick around," Donn repeated, his glance meeting Tarbell's.

"Sorry—"

"Look, Sam," Donn said argumentatively, "somehow I got a feeling you owe me some money. Now why not be fair? I hear you're pretty well fixed these days. Don't be a piker, for Pete's sake."

"You, uh, insist?" Tarbell's voice was strained.

Donn grinned. He nodded.

Tarbell sat down again, chewing his lip. He scowled at the deck.

"Think it's cold?" Donn asked. "Want to deal?"

"You don't play with marked cards," Tarbell admitted. "Oh, hell! Let's have some chips. What am I worrying about?" He emptied his wallet.

Fifteen minutes later he said, "Take a check?"

Half an hour later he was signing I O U's.

The game was fast, hard, and dangerous. It was straight, too, but no less perilous for that. The laws of chance were consistently kicked in the pants. Some men have a talent for cards, a sixth sense which is partly memory and partly a keen understanding of psychology. Donn had that talent.

The pendulum swung back and forth. The ante went up. Gradually Tarbell began to win again. He and Donn were the heavy winners, and at the end of an hour and a half, he and Hatton were the only ones left in the game, except, of course, Donn himself.

Once Tarbell thought Donn was bluffing, and called, but he was wrong. Meantime the stakes mounted. At last Tarbell got what he thought was a good hand, and raised on the strength of it.

Donn met and raised. Hatton did the same. Tarbell considered his cards—and thrust a stack of blues into the center.

He wrote another check, bought more chips, and raised again. Hatton dropped out. Donn met and raised.

As Tarbell pushed his last chips across the table, he realized that this cleaned out his bank account. Simultaneously he felt a curious warmth against his hip.

The book.

Was there another page reference on the cover? Tarbell didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. He met Donn's eyes, brown and sparkling with excitement, and saw that the gambler was going to raise again.

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He couldn't meet another raise.

He stood up abruptly. "Excuse me. Back in a minute," he said, and before Donn could protest, he headed for the bathroom. The door slammed shut behind him, and he jerked the book out of his pocket. The page number, black against luminous white, was 12.

And the message was: "He's bluffing."

"I'll be damned," Tarbell said under his breath.

"That," a low voice remarked, "is inevitable, I'd say. But such perspicacity is rare—eh, Belphegor?"

"Bah!" was the hoarse reply. "Always talk. Action, *I'd* say—quick, hard, and bloody."

Tarbell looked around and saw nothing unusual. He fumbled for the knob behind him, opened the door, and stepped back into the room where he had left Donn and the others.

Only—he saw as he turned—it wasn't the same room.

It was not, strictly speaking, a room at all. It was a three-dimensional surrealist landscape come to life. Overhead was empty gray sky, and a flat plain, curiously distorted as to perspective, stretched to a foreshortened horizon. Odd objects were here and there, inanimate, and with no sensible reason for their presence. Most of them were partially melted.

Three creatures sat in a row facing Tarbell.

One was a lean man with huge feet and the head of a unicorn. One was a saturnine, naked giant with malformed horns and a lion's tail. One was—ugh! A sad face with a crown regarded Tarbell ill-temperedly. From the bulbous body, with its twelve spider's legs, grew the head of a frog and the head of a cat—an unholy trinity, as it were.

Tarbell turned around. The door through which he had come was still there, but it was just a door, standing unsupported, with no framework around it. Moreover, it seemed to be locked, as he found after a frantic tug at the knob.

"Quick, hard, and bloody," said the same hoarse voice, which came from the squinting, saturnine giant with the lion's tail. "Trust me for that."

"Crudity, always crudity," the anthropomorphic unicorn murmured, clasping its knee between its hands. "You're a relic of the dark ages, Belphegor."

"You're a jackass, Amduscias," said Belphegor.

The three-headed spidery horror said nothing. It regarded Tarbell unwinkingly.

"Look, human," Amduscias began, squinting along its horn. "Devil to man, have you any preference?"

Tarbell croaked inarticulately. He found his voice with some difficulty.

"P-preference? About what? Where— How'd I get here?"

"Death hath a thousand something doors and they do ope both ways," Amduscias quoted inaccurately.

"I'm not dead."

"No," said the demon rather reluctantly. "But you will be. You will be."

"Tooth, horn and claw," Belphegor interjected.

"Where am I, then?"

"Oh, it's a hinterland," Amduscias said. "Bael made it specially for our rendezvous." He glanced at the silent three-headed creature. "Meg sent us. You know Meg, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know her." Tarbell licked his lips. He remembered the book, and lifted it with unsteady hands. The number on the cover was unchanged —12.

"Sit down," Amduscias invited. "We have time for a talk before you die."

"Talk," Belphegor growled, yanking viciously at his tail. "Pah! Fool!"

The unicorn-head bobbed solemnly. "I am a philosopher. There's no need to keep staring at Bael, human. He may strike you as ugly, but I assure you, we're a handsome group, as Hell's lords go. If it's Bael's plurality that troubles you, you should see Asmodee. Our Eurynome—the progenitor of the bogeyman. Sit down and let's talk. It's been years since I spoke with a human outside of Hell. And the ones in Hell can't carry on a lucid conversation," Amduscias went on ruminatively. "I used to talk with Voltaire a great deal, but since around 1850 he's done nothing but laugh. Mad, quite mad," the demon finished.

Tarbell couldn't keep his eyes off Bael. The petulant, melancholy human face regarded him fixedly. The toad face stared at the sky. The cat face looked at nothing. It wasn't Meg, though. That was something. Or was it? Tarbell's nails dug into his palms.

"What do you want?"

"You speak specifically, I assume—of now." Amduscias hunched his shoulders. "Be still, Belphegor," he added irritably. "If you had your way, this human would be in tattered shreds within seconds. And then what? Back to Hell for us."

"What's wrong with Hell?" Belphegor demanded, tugging at his tail, as though giving himself some eerie sort of spinal adjustment. "Too crude for your cultivated tastes?" He dug a reddish clot from under a toe claw.

"Exactly. I don't like this hinterland. Bael's got the damnedest ideas for scenery."

"Result of a tripartate mind, I suppose," Amduscias said. "Well, human, how do you prefer to be killed?"

"I don't," Tarbell denied.

Belphegor grunted. "Stop fooling around. Meg told us to get rid of this human. Let's get it over and go back home."

"W-wait a minute," Tarbell interrupted then. "Can't we straighten this out somehow?"

The feel of the book in his hand gave him an unreasonable confidence. "Meg's only a familiar. What right has she got to tell you what to do?"

"Courtesies of the trade," Amduscias explained. "Now tell us how you'd prefer to be killed."

"If you had your way," Belphegor said bitterly, "you'd talk him to death."

The other rubbed his horn. "It's an intellectual amusement. I don't pretend to be another Scherazade, but there are ways of driving humans to insanity through . . . um . . . conversation. Yes, I vote for that method."

"My master, how you do run on!" Belphegor exclaimed. "All right, I vote for ripping him apart, cell by cell." His broad gray mouth twitched slightly.

Amduscias nodded and glanced at Bael. "How would you like to dispose of the human?"

Bael said nothing, but began to crawl purposefully toward Tarbell, who drew back. Amduscias waved a deprecatory hand.

"Very well. We're in disagreement. Shall we snatch the human off to Hell and give him to Astoreth or Agaliarept? Or, perhaps, we could leave him here? There's no way out of this hinterland, except through Bael."

Tarbell tried to speak, and discovered that his throat was dry. "Hold on," he croaked. "I . . . I've got something to say about this, haven't I?"

"Very little. Why?"

"Well—I've no intention of being eaten."

"Eaten! Why—oh!" Amduscias looked at Belphegor's bared fangs and laughed softly. "We've no intention of eating you, I can say definitely. Demons can't eat. There's catabolism, but no metabolism. I wish humans took a broader outlook toward the universe," he finished, with a little shrug.

"I wish supernatural beings wouldn't talk so damn much," Tarbell said, with a flash of irritation. "If you're going to kill me, go ahead and do it. I'm sick of this, anyway."

Amduscias shook his head. "We can't decide on how to dispose of you, so I suppose . . . eh? . . . we'll just leave you here. After a while you'll starve. That all right, Belphegor? Bael?"

It seemed to be all right. Belphegor and Bael vanished. Amduscias stood up, stretching. "I'll say good-by," he remarked. "No use your trying to escape. That door's locked for good. You can't get out through it. Farewell."

He disappeared.

Tarbell waited for a while, but nothing further happened. He looked down at the book. It still said Page 12.

"He's bluffing." About what? Who? Amduscias?

The door?

Tarbell tried it again, but could not stir the knob, which seemed to have frozen motionless. He shoved the book back into his pocket and considered. What next?

It was utterly silent. The ambiguous melting objects here and there on the plain did not move. Tarbell walked toward the nearest and examined it. He could make nothing of the blobby outline.

The horizon—

He had a feeling that he was in the Looking-Glass garden, and that if he walked far enough, he would suddenly find himself back where he had started. Shading his eyes under his palm, Tarbell swept the unearthly landscape with a searching stare.

Nothing.

He was in danger, or else the book wouldn't have a page number on its cover. Again he referred to Page 12. Somebody was still bluffing. Amduscias, apparently. But bluffing about what?

Why, Tarbell wondered, hadn't the demons killed him? Their tactics reminded him of a war of nerves. They had wanted to destroy him—at least, Belphegor and Bael had; there was no doubt about that. Yet they had refrained.

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Maybe they *couldn't* kill him. They had taken the next best course—imprisoned him in this —this hinterland. What had Amduscias said at parting? "No use your trying to escape. That door's locked for good—"

Was Amduscias bluffing?

The door loomed surrealistically in the distance. Tarbell hurried back toward it and tried it again. The knob didn't move. He took out his pocketknife and tried to unscrew the lock, but couldn't. He succeeded only in breaking a blade. Some sort of stasis held the entire lock frozen motionless.

He kicked the door, but it was solid as iron. Meanwhile, the book still said Page 12. And the book was never wrong.

There had to be some way out. Tarbell stood glaring at the door. He had walked out of the bathroom into this alien world. If he could only reopen the door, he could walk right back into that hotel bathroom. Or—

"Oh, hell," Tarbell said, and walked around to the other side of the door, turned the knob easily enough, and stepped back into the room where Barney Donn, Tim Hatton and the two other men were sitting around a table, cards in their hands.

Donn nodded. "You weren't long," he said. "Ready to call me now?"

Tarbell hurriedly closed the door behind him. The book had not failed him, then. There were obviously two sides to every problem—and the demons had not expected Tarbell to think of the logical solution. Or, rather, the illogical one.

His experiences in the hinterland had not been measured by earthly time, either. Apparently he had left the room for only a minute or so. At least, the chips were in the pot, and Donn was holding his cards close to his chest, grinning encouragingly.

"Come on," he said impatiently. "Let's get going."

Tarbell still held the book in one hand, and a glance at it, as he slid the volume in his pocket, told him that Page 12 was still trumps. He took a deep breath and sat down opposite Donn. Hell—he'd play the game to the limit now. He had no doubt at all but that Barney Donn, like Amduscias, was bluffing.

"I'm raising," he said. "But you'll have to take a check."

"Sure," Donn nodded. His eyes widened at sight of the amount. "Wait a minute, Tarbell. This game's for cash. Checks are O. K.—if you've got the money to cover them."

"I've got it," Tarbell lied. "I'm in the chips, Barney. Didn't I tell you?"

"Hm-m-m. It'll be unfortunate if you can't pay."

Tarbell said, "The hell with it," and took more of the blue chips. Hatton's eyes widened. This was big money.

Donn raised.

Tarbell did the same.

Donn said, "Mind taking my I O U?"

"Not a bit."

The stakes mounted till Hatton got dizzy. In the end, Donn called and Tarbell laid down. The reporter had two kings and three queens. Donn had a royal flush—almost. He had drawn to fill the flush, but hadn't made it.

He had been bluffing.

Tarbell said, "You're lucky at stud, Barney, but I guess draw poker's my game."

Donn grinned. "I like excitement. Give me a pen, somebody." He wrote a check. "Money's easy for me to make. So I figure I have to pay out to make it come in. Here you are, Sam."

"Thanks." Tarbell took the check and collected his own scrip. He shook hands with Donn and led the dazed Hatton from the room.

In the lobby the photographer woke up sufficiently to say, "Hey! I forgot to snap the pictures."

"Let it wait," Tarbell advised. "I want to get to the bank before it closes."

"Yeah. I should think so. How much did you take Donn for?"

"Not quite enough," Tarbell said, scowling. The check was in five figures, but—what the hell! Five figures, with the magic book in his possession, was peanuts. He had muffed a chance by aiming too low. And now there were only six chances left.

Maybe only five! Those two crises might have counted individually. Damn again. If he used up all his chances, and Meg still survived, it would be just too bad. Somehow, he had to get rid of the familiar. But how?

How could he maneuver her into a situation where the book would tell him how to destroy Meg? The enchanted volume told him only how to protect himself.

Ergo—a situation where only Meg's destruction would save his own life. That was what was needed.

"Just like that," Tarbell grunted, his long strides carrying him toward the bank. Halfway there he changed his mind and hailed a taxi. "Sorry, Hatton. I thought of something important. See you later."

"Sure." The photographer stood on the curb, looking after the cab. "What a man! Maybe he don't care about money— I dunno. I only wish I had my pink little paws on some of that dough!"

Tarbell went to his broker's office, asked astute questions, and watched the ticker. He was playing for high stakes, and was willing, now, to take somewhat more than a gambler's risk. He put his entire fortune on AGM Consolidated, though he had to argue briefly with the broker.

"Mr. Tarbell! AGM? It's— Look! Four points while we've been talking. The bottom's dropping out of it."

"Buy it, please. All you can. On margin."

"Margin? Mr. Tarbell . . . look, have you got some inside tip—"

"Buy it, please."

"But—look at that ticker!"

"Go ahead and buy it."

"Well—all right. It's your funeral."

"Right," Tarbell said, with every appearance of satisfaction. "It's my funeral. Looks like I'll be flat broke in a day or so."

"I'll be asking you for more margin by morning."

Tarbell retired and watched AGM drop steadily. It was, as he well knew, one of the most worthless stocks in existence, and the bottom had dropped out of it only a day or so after the company's formation. He was on a toboggan rushing rapidly down to pauperism.

He took the book from his pocket and stared at it. There was a new numeral on the cover. That meant a new crisis—which he himself had precipitated. Swell!

Page 2 said: "A fortune in oil lies beneath your feet."

Tarbell's eyes widened. He looked down at the deep-napped claret carpet. Five stories down was the substrata of Los Angeles —*oil?* Here?

Impossible. In the Kettleman Hills, out at San Pedro—anywhere but in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. There couldn't be oil in this ground. If, by any fantastic chance, there was, it was manifestly useless to Tarbell. He couldn't buy the land and sink a well.

But the book said, "A fortune in oil lies beneath your feet."

Tarbell stood up hesitantly. He nodded at the broker and went out to the elevator. A small bribe enabled him to visit the basement, which was of no help whatsoever. The janitor, in answer to guarded questions, said that the Hill Street subway ran under the building.

Tarbell came out and stood in the lobby, chewing his lip, conscious that his money was rapidly being dissipated in the worthless AGM Consolidated. The book couldn't be wrong. It gave the answer to every human problem.

His eyes fell on the building directory. His broker's office was 501.

"Beneath your feet—" Oh-oh! The book might be very literal indeed. *What was in Office 401?*

A photographic supply company—but 301 gave the right answer. Pan-Argyle Oil, Ltd.

Tarbell paused long enough to check 201 and 101, but his original guess had been accurate. He didn't wait for the elevator. He ran up the stairs and burst gasping into the broker's office.

"Mr. Tarbell!" the man greeted him. "I'm still buying, but this is crazy. You'd better get out while the getting's good."

"I will—but tell me just one thing. Is Pan-Argyle Oil on the board?"

"Uh—yes. Nothing bid, three asked. But that's as bad as AGM. Pan-Argyle's a cheap wildcat outfit—"

"Never mind," Tarbell snapped. "Sell AGM and buy all the Pan-Argyle you can get your hands on. Margin!"

The broker threw up his hands and reached for the telephone. Tarbell examined the book. The numeral was gone.

And that left four chances. Maybe five—five at most. He'd play safe. Say, four chances to outwit Meg and get rid of her permanently. Then—if this oil deal worked out as he expected —he could sit back and relax.

He headed for a bar and toasted himself silently. Then he toasted the book. A handy little volume! If Napoleon had possessed it, there'd never have been a Waterloo—provided the chances had been used wisely. The point was, apparently, to play for big stakes.

Tarbell grinned. The next step—Meg. As for security,

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what was he worrying about? With sufficient money, he'd have security enough. As much as any man could. The powers of the book were limited, obviously; they couldn't change a man into a god. Only the gods were completely happy—if, indeed, *they* were.

But a fortune would be enough. Perhaps he'd go to South America—Buenos Aires, or Rio. Travel was restricted, in these days. Necessarily. Just the same, he could enjoy himself there, and there would be no difficulty with the law, in case his blackmailing proclivities were ever raked up. Extradition is difficult when a man has enough money.

A shadow flashed past his eyes, and he turned in time to see the tail of a cat vanish out the door. He caught his breath and grinned. Nerves.

But, unmistakably, the warmth of the book made itself felt against his side.

Very slowly Tarbell took it out.

Page 44.

"Poison!"

Tarbell looked thoughtfuly at the whiskey sour before him. He beckoned to the bartender.

"Yes, sir?"

"Was there a cat in here a minute ago?"

"A cat? I didn't see any . . . no, sir."

A little man sitting near Tarbell turned his head. "I saw it. It came over and jumped up on the bar. Sniffed at your drink—but it didn't touch it. Guess cats don't like whiskey." He giggled.

"What sort of cat was it?" Tarbell asked.

The little man looked at him oddly. "Ordinary sort of cat. Big fella. White feet, looked like. What of it?"

"Nothing." Tarbell turned back to his drink and sniffed it. There was an unmistakable bitter almonds odor. Prussic acid, the conventional poison.

Tarbell left the bar, his face rather white. Three chances. Perhaps he had miscalculated, after all. But ten, in the beginning, had seemed an abundance.

There was no sign of Meg.

He didn't bother to go back to the *Journal*, though he phoned to get a report on Pan-Argyle. He was not surprised to learn that a new field had suddenly been brought in somewhere in Texas. It looked big—plenty big. He had got in just under the wire.

He phoned his broker, and the news was eminently satisfying. Buying on margin had its advantages. As a result, Tarbell was already a rich man.

"It may peter out, though," the broker said. "Shall I hang on?"

"It won't peter out." Tarbell's voice was confident. "Keep buying, if there's any stock left floating around."

"There isn't. But you've got almost a controlling share."

"Good." Tarbell hung up and considered. He'd have to move fast now.

Three chances—

He cheered himself up by buying a car from an acquaintance, who had been pressed for money lately; and presently was tooling the big sedan along Wilshire Boulevard, squinting against the sunset. The next step was to find Meg and maneuver himself into a very dangerous position, where only the familiar's destruction could save him.

Quite suddenly Tarbell saw the way.

It would take two chances—but that would still leave one for emergencies. And it would get rid of Meg permanently.

He turned on La Brea and headed for Laurel Canyon. It was necessary to get in touch with the familiar. Under the circumstances, time counted. No more of the irreplaceable pages must be used up now. Not until the final test—

Tarbell grinned sardonically. He had had ten chances; the result was money. Well, the aphorism about spilt milk was consoling, after a fashion. He swung into Sunset, and thence to Laurel Canyon Road.

After that he went cautiously. He was hoping that Gwinn's body had not yet been discovered, and that he could get in contact with Meg at the magician's house. It was a slim chance, but he could think of no other.

Luck was with him. The house loomed dark and silent. Letters stuck out of the metal mailbox at the curb. The rising wind caught one and fluttered it away into the twilight.

Instinctively Tarbell's eyes sought the cat, but it was nowhere in evidence. He parked the sedan in the roadway behind the house, hidden by dwarf trees and underbrush. Then he went back and climbed the steps, his heart beating faster than normal.

The door was closed but unlocked. He pushed it open and entered.

The room was slightly changed. A pentagram was traced on the floor, and the remnants of several oil lamps were broken shards. Oil had soaked into the carpet, and was strong in Tarbell's nostrils. The body of Gwinn sat motionless behind the table.

"Meg!" Tarbell said softly.

The cat came out of the shadows, green eyes gleaming.

"Yes?"

"I . . . I wanted to talk to you."

Meg sat down, waving her tail. "Talk away. But you have used seven pages of the book already, you know."

"Then Barney Donn and the demons counted separately."

"Yes. You have three pages left."

Tarbell said, standing motionless in the twilit room, horribly conscious of Gwinn's corpse,

"Will you take a sporting chance?"

"Perhaps. What is it?"

"I'll gamble with you. My life as the stake. If I win, you—call it off. If I lose, I'll destroy the book."

Meg waved her tail. "I'm no fool. If we gamble, and you're in danger, the book will help you."

"Then I won't use it," Tarbell said, his voice a little unsteady. "Here's the proposition. We'll guess at a card's suit. Two guesses each. If I lose, I . . . I'll destroy the book. Only I make one stipulation."

"What?"

"I want twelve hours to set my affairs in order. Twelve hours from now, if I lose, I'll throw the book in the fire at my apartment and wait for you."

Meg looked at the man inscrutably. "And you won't use the book to help you win?"

"Right."

"I agree," the cat said. "You'll find cards on that shelf." It waved a white-mittened paw.

Tarbell got the cards and shuffled them expertly. He spread them out on the carpet and looked at Meg. "Will you draw? Or shall I?"

"Draw," the familiar murmured. Tarbell obeyed, but did not turn the card over. He laid it face down on the oil-soaked carpet.

"I choose—"

His side felt warm. Instinctively he drew out the book. On the front cover two numerals were black against the luminous white disk.

33

"Don't open it," Meg said, "or the deal's off."

For answer, Tarbell placed the book at his side, unopened. His voice shaking, he whispered, "Hearts and spades."

"All right." The cat flipped the card over with a deft paw. It was the jack of clubs.

The numeral on the books cover vanished abruptly.

Meg flicked out a lazy pink tongue. "Twelve hours, then, Tarbell. I'll be waiting as patiently as possible."

"Yeah—" Tarbell was looking at the book on the floor beside him. "Twelve hours," he repeated softly. "Then I'll destroy . . . this . . . and you'll kill me, I suppose."

"Yes," the cat said.

A new numeral appeared in the white oval—9. Tarbell said, "I'll be getting on," and picked up the book. He thumbed it idly.

Page 9 said, "Start a fire."

Tarbell took out a cigarette and lit it. The flaming match he tossed down to the oil-soaked carpet. And—

Fire blazed up, reflecting crimson and green in Meg's eyes as she bounded up, hissing. The feline side was in the ascendant now. Tail erect, back arched, she leaped to the table, spitting and snarling.

Tarbell jumped back to the door. The fire was spreading. He slid the book into his pocket and tossed the cigarette into a dark corner of the room. The red spark flashed out into flame.

"Like it, Meg?" he whispered above the increasing crackle and roar. "I don't think you do. Because it's the only thing that'll save my life—and I'm pretty sure that means your death."

The cat sprang to Gwinn's shoulder, glaring at Tarbell. Its hissing became articulate. "Not my death—but you've won! My term on earth ends when my warlock's body is destroyed. I won't survive him—"

"I remember. You told me that once before, but I didn't guess the right answer. Sorry, Meg!"

"My powers are waning already, or you'd die now. Yes, you've won. I'll see you in Hell."

"Not for a while," Tarbell

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grinned, opening the door. The draft drew a gust of flames toward him, and he backed off hurriedly. "I still have one page in the book left, and that'll keep me alive for a while—especially with you out of the way, and a fortune at my fingertips. It's just a matter of logic, Meg. Every human action can be boiled down to a basic equation—" He jumped back again—"and the only trick is to learn how to use the book. If Napoleon had owned it, he'd have conquered the world."

Fire was crawling toward the cat, yet she did not move from Gwinn's shoulder. She spat at Tarbell.

"Napoleon did own it," she snarled—

Then the flames drove Tarbell out of the house. Laughing quietly, he raced down the steps and around to where he had left his car. He had won—tricked both Meg and the book neatly by maneuvering himself into a position where only the familiar's death would save his own life. And there was still one page left.

A window crackled and broke. Fire poured out from it. Instantly the dry brush caught. Tarbell stopped short, a dozen feet from his car. He gave back, realizing instantly that this way of escape was blocked.

It didn't matter. He was invulnerable, as long as he had the book—as long as there was one chance left. He turned and ran for the road, wind gusting coldly against his sweating cheeks.

It was, perhaps, a mile down to Laurel Canyon, where he could get a lift. But it was all downhill, and he was in good condition. Even though the wind was rising, he could make it easily. And, at worst, the book would save him.

So Tarbell ran down the road, until, ten minutes later, he stopped short at sight of a trail of flame rushing down a gully in his path.

He took the first branch that forked, and cut down into another canyon. It was past sunset now, but the hills had become crawling towers of scarlet light. A siren screamed in the distance.

Tarbell went on. Once he took out the book and looked at it, but there were no numerals on the cover. He wasn't in serious danger yet.

A thought of panic struck cold into his mind. Perhaps he had, somehow, used up the ten chances! But no—that was impossible. He had kept careful count. When an emergency arose, the book would save him.

The increasing fury of the brush fire drove Tarbell down the canyon, until at last he was halted by another comb of flames racing up toward him. He was—apparently—trapped. Standing hatless and panting, he jerked out the book again, and this time a tiny moan of relief escaped him. There was no mistake—the tenth chance lay in his hand, ready to solve his problem. Page 50.

Tarbell opened the book to Page 50. It was easy to read the message, in the bloody light of the fire. It was rather horribly easy to read the message—its clarity had a touch of inhuman malice about it. Tarbell understood then, of course, about Napoleon, and about what Gwinn had seen in the book before his death; and he also realized how the unknown author had managed to boil all human crises down to fifty patterns. Forty-nine of them covered forty-nine eventualities, and told the logical solution. The fiftieth covered everything else, and was equally logical.

The letters on the fire-reddened fiftieth page said:

THE END.

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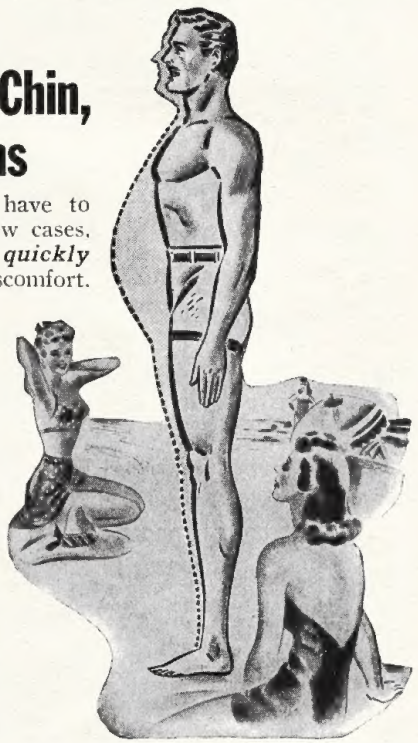

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